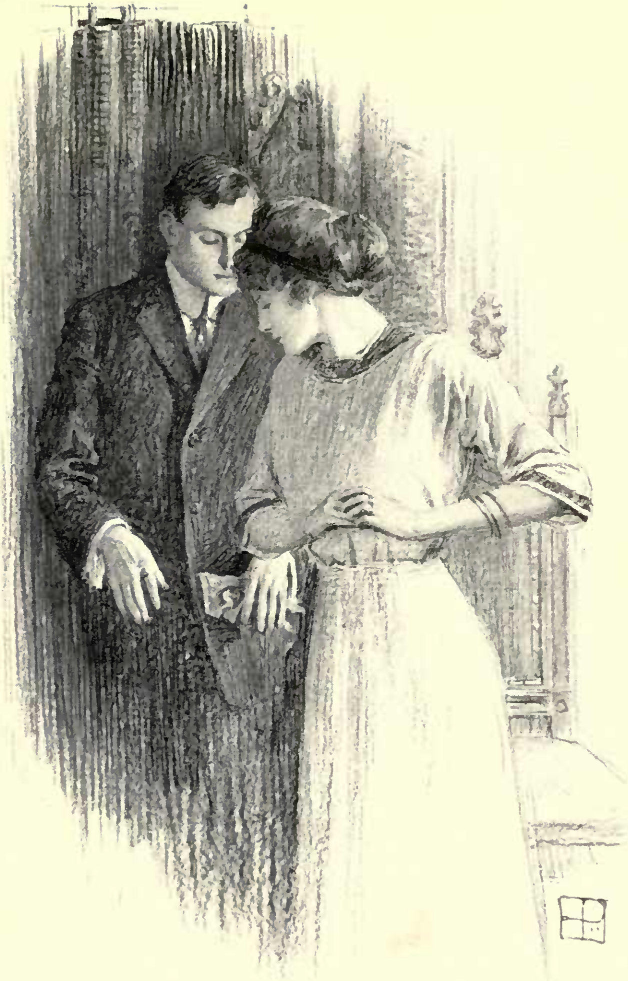
THE MAN IN THE BROWN DERBY

WELLS HASTINGS



She drew back with something like a sob

THE MAN IN THE BROWN DERBY

By

WELLS HASTINGS

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TO ELISABETH

SOME there be to whom the things of earth are plain, and some to whom heaven, which is of course about us, is revealed; and a certain few, who, because their faith is like a crystal, can see the little people dance o' midsummer nights. You by mind and spirit and heart walk sweetly and at will in the three worlds and make the three thrice blessed. Will you lend some benison to this tale—this old-fashioned tale of nowadays—of gallant deeds and cunning villainies—of strong men and fair women—of dark mystery and the world-old call of love.

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THE MAN IN THE BROWN DERBY

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I

THE PERSONAL

FOR a college-bred man I was in terrible case indeed. I was stranded in the most arid desert in the world — New York City — and I had only the clothes that I stood in, my grandfather's watch, and about fifty dollars in money. If I had just come fresh to the city and had its possibilities before me this would not have been so terrible. But I had been in New York for three months looking for employment, so that opportunity stood behind instead of before me. I had tried in every quarter I could think of, in search of work, and, so far, every door had been closed.

To one who has never seen me this must seem very strange indeed. Even to one meeting me casually in the street there seems no apparent cause why I, like other young men, should not find plenty of work for the asking. Indeed, in several offices

I was at first welcomed with open arms. But no business man in the city would keep me in his office once I had taken off my gloves. Through some strange prank of fate my hands, although of good shape and normal size, are blood-red from the wrists down, birth-marked like the god of death.

It was a strange misfortune. All my life my terrible hands have drawn an impassable line between me and the happiness of other men. My mother, God bless her, never feared me nor looked upon me with any other feeling but the tenderest one of love. But with my father it was different. The very first sight he had of me repelled him, and strive as he would he never could look at me afterward without some shadow of repugnance. He tried to be fair to me, but he avoided me whenever he could and there was never any close bond between us. When my parents were killed in a railroad wreck together it was the death of my mother that came with cruel shock. That my father had died gave me no more than a passing regret that another good man had left the world.

Perhaps it is my misfortune that makes me feel differently from other men in regard to death. Certainly, whatever the cause of my feeling may be, I have no fear of death whatsoever. I can see nothing terrible about it — except a temporary pain for the unfortunates who are left. I suppose this is the reason that I am not what is called a coward. The ultimate meaning of the word danger is peril of death. As death has never seemed to me a peril, rather a welcome step along the variable line of eternity, I have no feeling of shrinking from it. I take no pride in this feeling any more than I do in my rather unusual physical strength (which is merely another chance of my existence), but I find it hard to convince others of the sincerity of my feeling.

But, indeed, I have never had much of an opportunity to convince other people of anything. I can hardly remember the time when it has been a surprise to me to see the startled change come into people's faces as they noted my misfortune; and yet I have never quite ceased to be hurt in some measure. When I meet some new person and have my gloves on they are usually kind enough to seem frankly pleased with me — and then, sooner or later, they see my hands and the pleasure is gone for both of us.

I think that my school-days were the most painful ones of my life, for children are very cruel to one another in the open expression of their emotions. I do not mean by this I dislike children; for, on the contrary, I am more strongly drawn to them than I am to grown-ups. The wounds that children inflict are involuntary; only grown animals hurt for the pleasure of hurting.

Nevertheless, it was very hard for me to see healthy boys of my own age, few of whom would shrink from holding a cold toad in their naked hands, shrink back from my touch as if it were a contagion. I could beat any one of the boys that I met at any sport or feat of strength that he might choose to suggest, yet I had never a friend in all my years of schooling. Nor was the school proud of me or my strength; for such was my dislike of drawing any more attention to myself than the ordinary events of life made necessary that I refused to take part in any public contests, or to represent my school in any athletic games with any other.

At college I was a good deal more happy; for the average college man avoids expression of surprise as religiously as if acceptance of the unexpected or bizarre were a part of his creed of life. Still I made no friends. I have thought since that perhaps this was partly my own fault, that I may have been too sensitive, too reluctant to burden others with the weight of my own misfortune. So I went my own way alone, reading a great deal of my time away, and not particularly excelling in any branch of my regular studies except perhaps in physics and psychology.

The death of my parents came a few weeks after my graduation, and I spent the next year in straightening out my father's somewhat tangled affairs, to find at the end of my labor that when all the family debts had been paid there was little left to divide between my brother and myself; enough, perhaps, to make a bare living income for one man. My father left no will, more because he hated to think of how he ought to distribute his money between a son he loved and one he did not, than from any other reason, I think. So I took five hundred dollars, which seemed to me sufficient then with the world before me, and set out to find the place I thought the world must hold for me. The rest of our inheritance I left to my brother. He was not strong, but was a handsome, attractive fellow, with an inborn love of luxury. As he had no training nor desire for work he certainly needed what fortune there was more than it was possible that I ever could.

Yet now, as I sat pondering my affairs on a bench in Washington Square, I almost wished that we had arranged to have my share at least five hundred dollars larger. As it was, the arrangement was final, and my last thought would be to go back upon it, or to appeal for aid which I knew must be a drain upon the far from satisfactory income of my brother.

It was one of the brilliant mornings so common to the last days of May in New York, and the Square was alive with children. They fluttered everywhere, dainty, occupied, entrancing. The benches were filled with nurses and mothers, with here and there an old gentleman taking the sun, or some private, like myself, in the great army of the unemployed.

The old gentleman in the seat next me had been dozing for the better part of an hour. Finally he awoke with a start and looked at his watch. He drew himself up as if the hour had at last arrived when he must set himself to work upon his multitudinous affairs. I smiled in sympathy with his waking shrug.

"Half-past eleven, sir," said he. "Indeed, I must be going. Would you care to glance over the morning paper, sir?" And he handed me the day's *Herald* that he had been nodding over, stamped his left leg tentatively, squared his shoulders with insistent vigor, and limped away in the direction of Fifth Avenue.

I looked after him feeling much heartened by the old-fashioned grace of his friendly courtesy, and spread his paper out tenderly upon my knees. It was the first gift of friendship that, as far as I could remember, had ever been offered to me by any hand other than my mother's.

There was little news. There had been a tenement fire on Hester Street, Mrs. Someone had given a rather notable coaching party, and some obscure millionaire on upper Fifth Avenue had died after five years of mild insanity. I was glad that he had got his release, and turned from habit to the employment column. There was nothing there but the same old catalogue of wants that experience had taught me to look upon as hopeless. Then, having nothing better to do, I turned to the "Personal" column, that bait box of villainy, that marriage bureau of the restlessly sentimental. There again was the usual thing, the long line of "Object Matrimony," and then with a quickened interest my eye fell on the following:

> "A gentleman capable of deciding on the instant may become financially independent for life. No applicant will be considered who is bound by any ties whatsoever, or who has not had a college education. Apply in person between the hours of four and five P. M. at —— Lexington Avenue, to-day.
> "MR. BARNABY."

The thing was in all probability some swindle, I reflected, and yet I could not help being interested — for I seemed to myself exactly to fill every qualification. Who (more especially what college man) could be found with fewer ties than I had? As for deciding any matter quickly, it seemed to me that I could decide upon the instant on anything, short of committing a crime, that would show me the way to making my living.

I read over the address again and put the paper into an inside pocket. I would go, for I had nothing to lose, and perhaps there was really something to gain.

But first I decided on a change of linen, a shave and a new pair of gloves. If I were going to do the thing at all, I might as well do it as a gentleman should. No, confound it, it was not my necessity, nor my poor logic which was leading me into this new path, but the very newness of the path itself, the strange, alluring call of the unknown. The clouds of despondency seemed to clear away from my mind, leaving it clean swept for whatever might be before me. So that it was with a light heart that I strode out under the Washington Arch, with the joyous thrill of premonition stirring vaguely at my heart's roots.

II

THE APPLICANTS

I LUNCHED indolently at the Café Martin; for I had some time to kill, and I knew that I could meet any situation the more easily if I had eaten and eaten well. Then I smoked the most expensive cigar of my life. This lunch seemed somehow a solemn rite, a farewell to the little life that I had led in my isolation. Of course I dined gloved, as I do in all public places. Then, as I smoked the last of my cigar, I walked slowly down to Twenty-third Street. It was just half-past three as I stepped on board a Lexington Avenue car.

On the car I watched my neighbors lazily. I hardly seemed myself, my adventure was so strongly at the helm. I was surprised that the car took so short a time to make the journey uptown.

In fact, I was past my destination before I knew it, and had to walk back two blocks and a half. The number corresponding to the address given in the advertisement was over the door of a private stable. Nailed to the front of the building was a large "To Let" sign. I had forgotten my suspicions that the whole thing might be a swindle or a hoax, and this barrenness of promise came to me with a decided shock. Indeed, I did not stop at the building at all, but walked past as if the matter had no interest for me. Then I glanced at my watch. It lacked ten minutes of the hour, so I took a stroll and thought the situation over. Then I came to my senses. If *I* were going to be discouraged by a mere exterior, what could I expect from my employer. At exactly four I rang the bell beside the smaller door of the stable. It was one of the large folding doors that was opened; however, opened barely enough to admit me, and I found myself in a large dismantled carriage room where about thirty other men were sitting.

Evidently I had come to the right address. About me sat men of all ages and circumstances. Some were chatting together in low voices, some sat grimly apart, with flushed faces, and eyes staring in front of them. One man sat with his face buried in his hands, still another had turned his chair so that he sat in a corner with his face turned toward the wall. None of them appeared altogether at his ease.

I scanned the group eagerly, and heaved a sigh of relief. As far as I could see there was no one from my university, or any one that I had ever seen before. Even if there had been, I was too much accustomed to see men look at me askance to have cared how any one looked at me here. It seems to me worse to look ashamed than to look afraid.

I took a chair from a pile in one corner (they seemed to have been hired for the occasion from some undertaker) and sat myself at ease to await developments. I waited the full hour during which the only interruptions were rings at the bell, the entrance from another room of the servant who had opened the door for me, and the admittance of other candidates for lifelong independence. By the time a rickety little alarm clock on a shelf by the harness closet showed five o'clock, the big room was full, and men sat with chair touching chair. There were seventy-two of us.

At one minute past five the servant came out again from the other room and locked the folding doors. Then he worked his way about the room, and touched a man at random. The man got to his feet, his face paling and flushing by turn and followed the servant out of the room. The door was closed behind him.

Three minutes afterward another of us was summoned in the same way, and so it continued. The interviews lasted about two minutes each, although some were much shorter and some took nearly five. It was an hour and a half before half the company had gone through the little door, and my turn came. I had quite expected to be among the last, and was just hitching my chair aside to allow the summoner to pass when he touched me on the shoulder.

I arose and squared my shoulders, threading my way after him among the chairs, and, as he held open the door, I gave a straightening touch to my tie and stepped before him into the next room. He followed me, closing the door after him.

" The man who came on the even hour," he announced.

It was the small room common to many city stables, the sanctum of the head coachman, where bits and robes are usually kept. A large pine table blocked the room in the middle, and at the farther side of it sat one of the strangest men that I had ever seen. His shoulders were drawn about his ears, and his hard little eyes were almost hidden under the extraordinary, long, gray bush of eyebrows that shot down over them. His nose was wide and long, the only fat thing in the shrunken leanness of his face. His lips and chin were long also, but the lips set tightly, while the flesh of the pointed chin hung loose, and when he spoke it was this that seemed to move rather than the lips.

" What is your name? " The voice was low and soft.

" Mason Ellsworth," I answered, and squared my shoulders while he was writing it down on a slip before him.

"College?"

"Yale."

"Class?"

"190—"

"Step nearer to the window and turn so that I may see you thoroughly."

I went over to the window and turned myself about like a clothier's dummy.

"That is sufficient, Ellsworth," he said, when I had turned twice around for his inspection; "you won't do."

"Why?" I asked sharply, for I had seldom been treated so abruptly before I had removed my gloves.

"That is my affair, sir. Peters, open the door for the gentleman."

I turned to the door with a heavy heart. It seemed I would not even pass muster among the broken men who answered doubtful "Personals." But, as I put on my hat, the old man at the table recalled me sharply.

"Stop a moment, Ellsworth," he said. "Why were you tempted to answer such a dubious advertisement?"

"That is my affair," I answered; for I had had enough of this abrupt inquisition.

The old man grinned widely and his chin trembled like a rabbit's. "On the contrary it is very much my affair. Answer my question!"

I was thoroughly angry. What right had this silver-voiced old ape to torture me if he had already determined my unfitness. I stepped over to the table and slowly drew off my gloves, stretching my hands across the table to him. The servant, by the door, caught his breath sibilantly.

"Sit down, Ellsworth," said the old gentleman softly; "perhaps we can arrange matters after all."

I sat down wonderingly. Why should the world be turned topsy-turvy? Why should the very thing that had stood in the way of my fortune all my life suddenly turn seemingly to my advantage? Queerly enough, I liked the old man at the table less than ever. I determined not to advance one step in the affair until I had sifted its honesty to the very bottom, to question this strange man as sharply and directly as he questioned me. After all, manual labor was still open to me; I was as free to refuse him as he had been to dismiss me.

"I would rather know your name before I permit you to ask further questions," I said.

The old man frowned, and then nodded slowly. "You shall know my name when I definitely engage you. Are you, or have you ever been married?"

I moved my hands upon the table.

"So I suppose," he said. "Still I would rather have a positive answer. Are you married, sir?"

"Hardly," I answered, "nor am I like to be."

His chin wobbled amazingly. "And you have no other ties whatsoever?"

"None whatsoever," I said.

"You are how old?"

"Thirty-two."

"Are you perfectly willing to break off all communication with your friends, or to communicate with them only as I direct?"

"I have no friends." I tried to speak indifferently, but could not altogether keep some of the pain of my isolation from my voice.

It seemed as if this pleased him. I wondered if he were not, perhaps, slightly insane. His eye was very steady and direct, however.

"If you were settled in the country on a comfortable income, would you be willing to give me your word to remain there, or to move only upon my consent?"

I thought this over for a moment. Such a life would feel fettered in time I was sure, and yet even a prospect like this appealed to me more strongly than any I had ever dared to dream of. "Yes, I would agree to do that," I said finally.

"Then you can consider yourself engaged, Mr. Ellsworth. My name is Ephraim Bond. Your income will be about thirty-one hundred dollars a year."

"Are you not going a little fast, Mr. Bond?"

I asked. "You have not told me as yet how I am to earn this money?"

"Frankly, Ellsworth, you ask quite too many questions to please me. What does it matter to you what you have to do? I give you my word that you will receive the income. I will deed the principal to that effect this afternoon."

"Frankly, Mr. Bond," I said, with rising anger, "I don't care for the way you do business. I do not even feel certain of your honesty. Can you tell me explicitly what it is you want me to do, or shall we consider the interview closed?" and I began putting on my gloves.

"You're a young fool," he snapped impatiently, "and I'm an old fool to waste my time over you. There are forty other men waiting in the next room." He peered at me from beneath the overhanging brows, met my eye and looked away. "All I want you to do is to marry my niece," he fretfully concluded. "She is rather good looking, if that is of any interest to you."

"To — marry — your niece?"

"Yes, Ellsworth, marry her. There is nothing dishonest in that, is there?"

My brain whirled. I had never spoken two words to any other grown woman than my mother in my life since I had entered college. God knows I had dreamed of them often enough, but to speak to a woman in friendship, to marry her — the very suggestion of it dazed me.

"But the lady — ?" I stammered.

"Is perfectly willing to marry the man I choose for her."

"But — but why do you choose me?"

Mr. Bond rose abruptly from his chair. "See here, Ellsworth," he said coldly, "that at least is none of your business. Perhaps I think you are the finest man in the world. Perhaps I like the thought of you because I am sure I know that no other woman will be likely to tempt you — once she has really seen you. Come, my carriage is waiting, and I am a very busy man."

"Do you want me to come now, on the instant?"

"I thought that you felt sure that you could decide on any matter quickly."

"I will come," said I, and took my hat from the table. At least I would find out what the thing was all about, what the lady had to say in the matter. Perhaps, indeed, the man was really insane, and this girl, whoever she was, was actually in need of help.

"That's better," said Mr. Bond. "Peters, you may dismiss the other applicants."

III

THE CONTRACT

WE sat in silence in Ephraim Bond's closed coupé during the drive to the house. I had never heard of my employer in my life, and was much interested in watching our direction, speculating with a certain mental detachment as we drove along, on the probable neighborhood of his residence. When we turned into Fifth Avenue I thought that we were about to cross the Park, and was no little surprised that our course continued straight up-town. But my surprise was even greater when we drew up before the steps of a large granite house in the upper seventies.

The door was opened for us by a gray-haired negro, who peered at me almost rudely, and shuffled into the darkness at the farther end of the hallway, with Mr. Bond's hat and cane. Mr. Bond, himself, showed me the way into a reception-room, which was as poorly lighted as the hall.

" I will call my niece," he said hurriedly, and as hurriedly would have left the room had I not laid a detaining hand on his sleeve.

"Just one moment, Mr. Bond," said I; "I would like to see your niece alone before there is any talk of this marriage between us."

"I see no reason for it," he answered coldly.

"I do," I said. "You might as well understand me, once and for all, sir. This is, I think you will admit, an unusual proceeding. I have come with you so far, but now that I am here we must deal openly. Not only must your niece know what manner of man I am, but I must also be sure that she moves in this strange affair of her own free will, that this bargain is as much her desire as it is your wish. I tell you she will be a strange woman if she consents without coercion to marry a man branded as I am."

Ephraim Bond smiled in the semi-darkness. "You are very suspicious, Mr. Ellsworth. But, after all, I see no reason why I should not satisfy your cautious nobility. I won't intrude at all on your meeting. My niece will come down alone, and you can introduce yourselves."

Before I could answer he had left the room.

I had wished to question him further, to spare the girl the embarrassment of any awkward step on my part; but her uncle's leave-taking had been so abrupt that I was left with my questions upon my lips. I stepped over and drew the heavy window curtains back as far as they would go, letting in a little of the waning May sunshine. It would be well for two people embarking upon such an enterprise, for this unknown girl and this chance-found man, to see one another plainly, to meet face to face in the open sunlight.

I wondered what sort of woman she would prove to be. Her uncle seemed very sure of her, of the way she would bear herself in this meeting with a strange and hideously marked man, who came in answer to a newspaper advertisement to marry her for his living. Perhaps she was unfortunate in some such way as I was, I thought, or in some pressing distress that only marriage could solve. Perhaps,—but the portières parted and she stood hesitating in the doorway.

I stood wide-eyed and trembling in my place by the window. I could see her quite plainly in the better light, and she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She was small, but straight and fair, with wonderful blue eyes that turned to me wistfully. I thought I saw in them something of relief. A fierce hatred of myself and of my little, sordid speculations swept over me. I wanted to go to her, and beg the grace of her forgiveness upon my knees, but, for the first time in my life, I was desperately afraid, so that I could only look at her and tremble.

" My uncle sent me down," she said at last; " I am Nancy Bond."

Then, God be thanked, some flicker of manliness came back to me, and I went over to her, and stretched out my gloved hand.

"Do you know why I am here?" I asked.

"Yes. You are the man who has been chosen for me to marry."

"Yes," I said gravely. "I am that man; but now, God help me, I am more. I am the man who has come, to marry you, if you will, but to help you to the best of his poor power in any way that you may desire."

She looked at me in a sudden surprise and flushed painfully.

"You will be giving me more than I have the right to ask in fulfilling my uncle's wish," she said, and in some way the formal little sentence seemed to me all of tragedy.

"But can you wish it too?" I persisted, as gently as I could. "Forgive me, but how can a woman such as you are dare trust a man she has never seen? Do you know that I came in answer to a newspaper advertisement, that I came, a common fortune hunter, at your uncle's promise of money?"

"Yes," she said, "I know that. Let us not talk of it any longer. You are a gentleman, as my uncle promised; that is all that I need to know for the present. I dare not tell you everything now; I trust you; that is enough. Come, my uncle will be growing impatient."

She held her head bravely, but tears had crept into her eyes, and her cheeks were red with mortification.

It was more than I could bear. “Surely,” I said, “I can help you in some other way in your trouble.”

But she shook her head.

“Do you know about my hands?” I asked.

“Yes, something.”

“But you must know more.” I would rather have stood naked in the street than have shown her my dreadful hands, but I shakingly took off my gloves, and held my hands in the light.

She drew back with something like a sob. “It was very like Uncle Ephraim,” she said at last.

I bowed my head in silence. My heart was choking me. Then I felt her hand softly upon mine, and looked up to see pity in her eyes and the tears now flowing freely down her cheeks.

“You are very brave,” she whispered softly, “a very brave gentleman. Help me to be brave too; for I am afraid and I need your help.”

I looked beyond her with new-found courage, with new grace to meet the world, and eyes that looked yearningly into the future. Then my thoughts came back to earth again with a rush; for I saw that the portières at the door were gently moving, and the gleam of an eye showed flickeringly at their parting.

I strode over to them suddenly, and my hand grasped through them the solid arm of a man.

With a wrench it was torn away from me. I slid the curtains back with a jerk, and stepped into the hall. I glimpsed a moving shape at the dim farther end; then a door opened and shut, and I was alone in the hall. No, not alone, for behind me stood Nancy Bond, her hand to her heart and all the flush of color fled from her face.

I turned to her and put a steadying arm about her shoulders. For a moment she leaned weakly against me, shuddering in a voiceless terror; then she mastered herself somewhat, and stood erect, while my arm fell back again to my side.

"Did you see him?" she whispered. "Did you see his face?"

"No," I said. "There was some one, but he got away too quickly. It was probably your uncle, come to hear how well he might trust us. There is nothing to be afraid of." Indeed, now I thought of it, it could be none other, and yet his arm had felt more muscular than I should have expected. He seemed to be a very tricky old gentleman.

But Nancy Bond shook her head. "No, it was not my uncle, I do not think it was, at least. Yet it couldn't have been —"

"Nancy!" Ephraim Bond's voice sounded softly from the head of the stairs. If he had run up by the back way he certainly showed a surprising activity for his age. Still, who could it have been, who was it that had so driven the color from

Nancy's cheeks? Had she just stopped short of another name that, as yet, I knew nothing of? I thought all these things, as I slowly followed the woman I was going to marry up the stairs.

"Going to marry," yes, the thing was decided now. She had said that I would be doing her a service, she had overcome with the tenderness of her pity all the terror of my misfortune, she had laid her white hand upon the red horror of my own; come what might, be the mystery what it would, I would marry her. She could direct our future as she would, and I would stand ever ready to give her what aid I could. I thanked God, as I had never thanked Him before, that He had made me strong, with the courage and will of a strong man. And resolving these things, I followed her along a narrow hall, and into a large front room, where Ephraim Bond sat hunched and waiting.

I do not know why I should have been surprised to see still another man in the room, but somehow I had expected to find Mr. Bond waiting alone to receive us. Perhaps he had foreseen that I would use such an opportunity to question him further, that I would wish to know more than I had been able to learn in my short interview with his niece. At any rate, sitting in the bow of the window at the far side of the room was a young man of about my own age, a young man dressed in ill-fitting clericals. Things moved swiftly in the Bond household.

"Mr. Ellsworth," my employer said briskly, "allow me to present Mr. Stevens, who has most kindly consented to officiate. Nancy, you remember I told you Henry Stevens was a distant relative of ours?"

Mr. Bond's voice was softer than ever; Nancy bowed her head in silence; Mr. Stevens smirked.

In fact, this young man smirked a good deal too much, I thought. He was a very thin, and a very blond young man, with watery, wandering blue eyes. His ears flared astonishingly, and he picked continually at already lacerated finger ends. His clerical collar formed a generous wall about a scanty neck, whose enormous "Adam's apple" steadily appeared and disappeared behind its starchy white rampart.

"Nancy, you will please call Jonas. Mr. Ellsworth and I have a little matter of business here; Mr. Stevens will excuse us."

Miss Bond left the room silently, the Reverend Mr. Stevens obliterated himself in the bow-window, and I crossed over to the table after Ephraim Bond. Three papers lay upon it. The first was a marriage license made out in blank, and duly signed and sealed; the second seemed much longer, and the third was evidently a deed of property.

Mr. Bond indicated them to me with a wave of his hand, and seating myself deliberately, I took up the license.

"How could you get this in blank?" I asked.

Mr. Bond smiled. "I have some acquaintance at the Bureau. It is quite correct, or will be when you have filled in your name. You need not be afraid, Mr. Ellsworth."

"I am not afraid," and I smiled too. It would be easy to take out another, I reflected. In fact, it would not be hard, and would certainly be very much safer, quietly to repeat this whole wedding before some county clerk, when we had left Mr. Bond and his emaciated protégé behind us in that gloomy house. I filled in my name carelessly and handed the license across the table to Mr. Bond.

The next paper I read at length. It was a release and an agreement; releasing Ephraim Bond from any further payments to me, and binding me to the terms he had told me of in the Lexington Avenue stable, or rather it was an elaborate expression of those terms.

"This should have been made in duplicate," I observed coldly, for I was anxious that he should still believe that I was driving callous bargains with him.

He frowned. "There is absolutely no reason for that, Ellsworth," he answered. "This binds you to keep faith with me. As far as I am concerned, I cease to exist for you as soon as you receive your payment; I owe you nothing in the future."

This, of course, I knew was nonsense, but I had, thank God, long ceased to care for the things which had led me first to answer his advertisement. I had spoken to a woman who had answered me in kindness. While she kept faith I could afford to trust the rest of the world. I looked up; Nancy was coming in at the door. I signed the paper with I knew not what stirring at my heart and taking up the last document, glanced hastily over it. It was executed with all the proper signatures and seals, and gave me life interest in certain stocks and bonds; but it had lost its first importance, and I crammed it into an inside pocket.

Mr. Bond stood up, as did I, and the minister came forward to the middle of the room, prayer-book in hand. Nancy Bond came and stood beside me. She was very pale, but it seemed to me that now she was less afraid. At a word from her uncle the ceremony commenced.

A wedding ceremony is a short thing after all. It surprised me that such a contract could be bound so quickly; and to my unconscious surprise, we both gave our responses clearly, repeating them after Mr. Stevens in tones much steadier than his own. For a minister he seemed a very clumsily fearful one.

When the time came for the giving of a ring, Mr. Bond took one from his pocket, a bright new one, evidently newly bought. But I shook my head at him, and taking from my own pocket a little, soft leather case, put a ring of my own upon my wife's finger. It had been the other woman's ring, my mother's; since her death my dearest possession. For the first time since the beginning of the ceremony I thought that Nancy trembled a little.

Then, of a sudden, I found that we were man and wife, and for the second time in my life I was a little frightened.

IV

ARRIVAL

I DID not offer to kiss my bride, nor did any of the others. Indeed, except for Jonas, who had followed Nancy into the room, and with Ephraim Bond had acted as witness to the ceremony, none of us showed much emotion. But Jonas' black puzzled face exhibited a certain disquietude, which he could not hide, even under the frown of his employer.

Mr. Stevens seemed very nervous, smirking and scowling in maddening repetition. He lingered only a moment, then, with some muttered apology, left the room, glancing back over his shoulder at us, till his thin neck looked as if some one had been trying to wring it. Mr. Bond did not even trouble to bid him good day, and Jonas was far too engrossed with his thoughts to show him the door. He must have let himself out unassisted.

When he had gone, Mr. Bond wheeled upon the trembling negro.

"You are a fool," he said. "Leave the room, and see that you stay in your pantry until I ring for you."

"But, Mistah Bond, did —? P'r'aps I ought to infohm yoh that —"

"Leave the room. Do you hear me? Leave the room!" Ephraim Bond's voice was sharper than I had heard it, and the old negro went hesitatingly out of the room, as if he were giving up a duty unwillingly and apprehensively. Just as he reached the door he looked back and nodded with evident meaning to his employer, and what color the marriage service had left her, vanished from Nancy's face before my eyes. Ephraim Bond made a half movement toward the door, and Jonas fled. We could hear the clattering shuffle of his feet on the back stairs. Below, one door shut softly and another banged. Then all the house was quiet.

"Here are your railroad tickets, Mr. Ellsworth," and Mr. Bond held out an envelope to me; "you will find my carriage waiting for you at the door. Nancy, you know me; you can perhaps advise your husband about my whims, but, even to her husband, a woman is safer in not telling all she knows. I will see you as far as the door myself."

We started after him. Nancy was trembling so now, that I took her hand and tucked it under my arm. I held it so until I helped her into the carriage. I noticed that a small trunk and a handbag were up beside the coachman, then I stepped in and closed the carriage door upon us; the coachman touched the horse with his whip, and we were off. When we had driven a block, I looked out through the small window in the back. Ephraim Bond still stood in the outer vestibule, but he was not looking after us, but had turned, and seemed to be watching a tall man in a brown derby hat, who was running after a bus in the other direction.

A low sob caught my ear, and I dropped the little curtain. Nancy had drawn herself deep into her corner, and was sobbing as if her heart would break.

For a long time I watched her in silence. She cried steadily, her face buried in her arm. It hurt me more than anything ever had, and yet what could I do, what comfort could I give a woman I had so married? It was even possible that my very presence was the reason of her tears. Finally I stretched out a hand to her timidly.

At my touch upon her arm she looked up, and although her eyes were full of tears, and her sobs still came gaspingly, she smiled into my eyes.

"Are you so unhappy?" I asked.

"No, I am not unhappy — I — I am free. We have really left that dreadful house, have we not? Do you wonder that I must cry a little — I have held myself so long, and now I am here. You will never let them take me back, will you?"

"Never!" I promised. I ached to take her in my arms, that she might feel the strength of me, the absolute certainty of my protection. But I let her rest quiet, all alone in her corner, to sob the weight of her fear away. For myself I had much to think of, a future to plan, a lifetime to consider, but I let the future go for the moment. To sit and watch her, curled there beside me in the great carriage, was a pleasure too sweet to miss.

As our carriage turned into Twenty-third Street, my wife sat up and dried her tears, smoothing the disarray of her hair, and setting her dress to rights with little pats and shakes that were wonderful to see. This was better, and I was much comforted. For if she could take thought of these things she was surely getting away from her fright and sorrow. I could not keep from wondering, even at that moment, what she feared and what she had suffered, and in what manner she had been persuaded to give herself to me so docilely. I would question her as soon as I dared, I thought, as soon as she was strong enough and composed enough to talk over such matters with me. It would be best for us both that I should know something of her life, that I should be prepared to meet the future. But, still, there was time enough; I would not trouble her with questions until I knew that she was ready for their answering.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I thought that you knew," I said. "I haven't looked yet. Let us see." And I put my hand in my pocket and drew out the envelope. Nancy came out a little from her corner.

In the envelope were ten ten-dollar bills, a lease for a twenty-acre farm, and tickets reading to Marbury, a town evidently somewhere on the line of the Pennsylvania railroad.

"We are going to be buried," I said. "Does the prospect frighten you?"

She did not answer me, but she did not look as if she were afraid. Our carriage was drawing up before the Pennsylvania ferry house. I put the envelope with the money and the lease back in my inside coat pocket, but kept the tickets in my hand. A porter took down our luggage, and I checked the trunk, then I stepped to the ticket office, and inquired of the agent the whereabouts of Marbury. He said it was a local station about thirty-five minutes from Philadelphia. The express, he told me, was just about to leave; it would make fair connections with my local at Philadelphia. I turned to find Nancy, for the time was nearly up. But Nancy was at my elbow.

"Oh, hurry!" she said, and caught me by the sleeve.

"There is plenty of time," I answered; "we have two full minutes yet." I glanced up at the clock. It was a little later than I had thought. Outside there was a hansom drawing up with a terrific clatter. "There is a man," thought I, "who is later than we are."

Nancy tugged again at my arm. She looked frightened now, so I ran after her through the gate, and it was very lucky that I did, for it shut after us. We were the last people through, and I felt rather sorry for the man who had driven up in such a hurry, only to miss the boat and his train. As we stepped upon the boat I looked back, and saw his brown hat bobbing with the force of the altercation he was holding with the gateman through the bars. Already the space between the boat and the pier was beginning to widen, and Nancy's clutch upon my sleeve was slowly loosening. After a minute she withdrew her hand.

"Let us go out in front," she said. "I love the breeze. I feel as if it would blow all the little terrors one had away."

We talked but little all the way to Philadelphia. Nancy curled up in her chair, and pretended to be asleep, and I watched her, planning, as best I could, what our future should be. Once or twice she drew a little shivering sigh, and after a time, her foot touched mine. I did not know whether she did it knowingly, whether she felt some closer protection in the touch, but I did not move, and held myself very still, insanely happy at what I knew might be an entirely unconscious movement on her part.

For I loved her. I knew, now, that however she might come to think of me, this woman, who was my wife, was, and always would be, dearer to me than anything else in the world.

I am not sure when this first came to me, when I first knew that I had found my love, but I think that I loved her from the moment when I saw her standing in the door of Ephraim Bond's reception-room, I *know* that I loved her when she had touched my hand in pity and in friendship. So, as we rushed through the May beauty of northern New Jersey, on into the still more verdant green of Pennsylvania, I sat very stiffly still indeed, with my whole heart athrill at the magic of her touch, my affliction forgotten, and the joy and strength of youth pulsing dizzily at my brain. Two old ladies across the aisle looked at me and smiled. It was evident that they approved of my choice of a wife.

A grinning porter, brush in hand, stopped beside my chair, but I would have none of him. We were drawing into Philadelphia and every moment was precious. Then Nancy opened her eyes and looked about her for her satchel. The train had stopped.

We waited twenty minutes for our local, while Nancy talked nervously about whatever she saw before us, and kept a restless watch upon the people who passed. The poor child, I thought, was not quite able, as yet, to put her past fears aside.

The local was so crowded that we could get no seat together, and I was forced to content myself with sitting just behind her. She turned her head from time to time to see that I was still near to her, and I determined that I would put off no longer than I could help, finding out what this fear was that she was unable to leave behind.

At the Marbury station I found some sort of conveyance, and gave the driver directions to drive to the Butler Farm, as it was named in the lease. He grumbled a little, saying that it was three miles away, but at last we came to an agreement, and my wife and I started on our first drive to our new home. She sat very close to me all through the jolting trip, that seemed to me so short; for night had fallen and it had grown very dark.

We found the house in order and although a cold supper was laid out for us on the dining-room table, the lamps were unlighted, and there was no one to receive us. I soon had a light, however, and made Nancy eat a little supper. I ate something myself, but did not remove my gloves. For the time my dream must be laid aside.

When we had eaten, I rose from my chair and stood before my wife. She looked up at me, and her face seemed very tired and pale in the lamplight.

"Tell me," said I, "why you married me."

Her eyes smiled up into mine. "Because I was afraid to stay any longer in that house."

I bowed my head. It was what I had thought.

"Will you tell me about it sometime?" I asked.

"Yes, I will tell you when you wish."

"Thank you," I said.

We were silent for a little while, then I took up the light.

"You must be very tired," I said; "we will find your room. I will sleep somewhere within call, so you need have no fear of all the things that used to trouble you. You have been more kind than any one but my mother has ever been to me. I hope that we may grow to be friends in our exile. Now let us look for your room."

On the next floor we found a room that had evidently been made ready for us, and I gave her the lamp.

"I hope you will sleep well," I said. "See, I will take this room just across the hall."

She stretched out her hand to me, and I held it in my own for a fleeting second. Then I turned and opened my own door.

"Please," she said, and I saw her still standing in her doorway, "please, would you mind leaving your door ajar?"

V

ALARMS

THE room that I had chosen was bare, all its furniture consisting of a bed, a washstand, and a bureau, all of the plainest wood. On the floor, however, was a rag carpet that was a thing of beauty.

It was useless for me to pretend, even to myself, that I had any thoughts of going to bed. The day had been too momentous for me to think of forgetting it in sleep, until I had had at least time to review its events in my mind, to adjust myself to the life, that, of a sudden, I found myself committed to lead. I, who had that morning been an irresponsible young man, a rejected applicant for work, a lounger on a park bench, found myself to-night a man of some means, a man in love, with the woman I loved alone in my care, a woman who might or might not be my legal wife.

About my attitude toward Nancy I had no doubts whatsoever. She had consented to this strange marriage because she had felt some trust in me, or, at any rate, because she hoped that life in my care would be endurable; not because she loved me. Whether our marriage had been legal or not, I should consider that I alone was bound, that, unless she could come to love me in some measure as I loved her, I would never allow myself to think of her in any other way than a woman whose well-being and happiness fate had given into my care as a sacred trust, to be freely rendered her should she find some protector more worthy of their keeping, in her eyes, than I. But I prayed a great prayer that such an one might never come, that Nancy herself might perhaps by some miracle come to return my love.

I had no doubt that Ephraim Bond, himself, was, in some mysterious way, the fountain head of all her fears; and I made up my mind I would find out the very last of them and that that soft-spoken old gentleman should come to know what manner of man I was. He may have judged me of a timid nature, I had traveled from office to office so long, and had so long rather shrunk from any searching scrutiny by my fellows. But, as I have said, I am not by nature timid, and he should come to know this clearly if, indeed, he had had any hand in the terrors of his niece. My infirmity should trouble me not at all where the affairs of my love were concerned, where any sought to do evil to her happiness.

The moon had risen and was casting the long shadows of the trees in dainty lacery. Our house was set at some distance from the main road, at the end of a winding lane. It was pleasant to be so out of the hum of affairs, so thrown by the nature of our very surroundings into one another's society. If ever a man was given a chance to show himself plainly to the eyes of his love I bade fair to be that man. I smiled as I looked out upon the silver, moonlit ribbon of our lane. Then every muscle in my body grew tense, for the dark shadow of a man had moved from the shade of one great tree to another.

I tiptoed quickly to Nancy's door and listened. There was no sound, and I was glad that she was tired enough to sleep in the face of all that she had gone through. Then I stole as softly as I could down the creaking stairs, and let myself out at the front door, creeping from the porch in the fortunate shelter of the vines. Almost on hands and knees I worked myself down the winding lane, taking little short-cuts when I could with safety. When I had got some distance from the house I stopped and waited behind a great clump of hydrangeas.

The man, I considered with myself in my hiding place, was in all probability intruding innocently enough. He might be a tramp looking for some hay-stack or outbuilding, where he could rest for the night, or he might be some native of the place spying curiously upon the new arrivals; for our coming must have smacked somewhat of mystery. But his approach had seemed to me unnecessarily stealthy. I had too much to guard to be a slothful guardian. I would at least give this intruder a healthy shock of surprise. Of a sudden the man himself stole into the shadow of my bush, bending nearly double, as I had bent. He meant no honest thing certainly.

I rose and softly took him by the throat, and, with tightening fingers, choked the scream that struggled there.

"What are you doing here?" I asked in a whisper.

The shadow was so intense that I could not see his face, but his arms waved convulsively in the darkness; I had not used my strength in so long a time that I had forgotten its power and how to temper it. I loosened my fingers a little, and he drew a whistling breath, then, with his right fist he struck me with all his strength between the eyes, so that I reeled back from him, tearing his collar and tie away in my slipping clutch.

By the time that I was on my feet again he was already some distance down the lane. I started to run silently after him; a shout, I feared, might awaken Nancy from the sleep she so needed. He turned his head a little and saw that I was gaining on him. For a second his pace slackened. Then he turned himself squarely about, and fired twice at me with leveled revolver.

The shots rang out in the stillness, like the thunder of a cannon. I turned and ran at the top of my speed back to the house, for I was very much afraid the shots might have awakened Nancy.

I had left the front door unlatched so that I let myself in without a sound, and, remembering the stairs that had creaked in my descent, I was able to gain the second floor almost noiselessly. I listened again at Nancy's door. She was moving softly about the room, and I thought that I could hear the rustle of clothes, as if she were dressing.

"Did you call me?" I asked in a low voice.

"No," she answered, speaking as softly as I had, "but I thought that I heard you go out, and then some one fired a revolver. Was it you?"

"No," I said; "it was probably some village roisterer, who found the night too quiet for him. Go back and get all the sleep you can; we have all our domain to explore in the morning."

"Have you been out of the house?"

I hesitated a moment. On the whole it would be better not to let her think that I had even been worried.

"No," I answered finally.

Her door swung open, and she stood before me, completely dressed. She looked at me for a long time without a word. It was an effort not to drop my eyes before the searching inquiry of hers.

"Mr. Ellsworth," she asked at last, "why is it necessary to lie to me?"

"I am not lying."

"Oh!" she cried, "why do you say that? You know that you have been away, you whom I trusted to stay within call, whom I have trusted enough to think that I might have the truth. Have I not trusted you in everything? Every one, every one, I tell you, has lied to me for the last five years, every one has cheated me and betrayed me — till to-day you came — and now you see fit to lie to me too!"

She turned her head away from me and a sob struggled at her voice. I was too much hurt, too much ashamed to answer, but stood with bowed head, cursing my shortsightedness, not knowing what to say. But I could not endure the sound of her weeping.

"I will lie no more," I said.

She raised her lamp to see me the more plainly, to read if this, too, were a lie. Her face went white. I took the lamp from her and set it on a little table in the hall.

"Are you hurt?" she asked. "Tell me, are you hurt?"

"It is only a scratch!" I laughed; "some fool thought I was the devil, and punched me for my interference."

She came very close to me, and touched my forehead with one soft hand, then held it suddenly to the light. There was a little stain of blood on it.

"Mason! Mason!" she cried, and her hands went to my shoulders, "is that all, are you quite sure that that was all? You are not wounded, are you? Oh, tell me the truth! You have no right to hide such a thing from me!"

"No, I am not hurt," I answered gruffly, for her touch unsteadied me. Then, because I could not help it, and she was very near, "Would it make any difference to you if I were?"

She did not answer me, she did not even look up, and I grew very much ashamed. A puff of air blew down the hall; the lamp flickered and went out. Her hands dropped from my shoulders.

"Will you forgive me?" I asked, after what seemed an age there in the dark.

There was another long silence, and I thought that I heard her sob again very softly. Then her hand touched mine. "There is nothing to forgive," she said wearily. "Good night."

For a little I stood in the hall, then I went into my own room, leaving my door ajar. I sat in my chair by the window, dizzy and sick and perplexed, wild hopes and dull despair gripping me ever and in turn. Then I heard the soft click of her door again. She had set it ajar. I threw myself dressed upon my bed. In a moment I was asleep.

VI

ADJUSTMENT

I AWOKE rather late the next morning. In fact, my first glance at my watch made me spring from my bed in horror. It was long past eight o'clock. There had been no sign of any servant about the place the night before, and, for all I knew, Nancy might have been up an hour or so and waiting for her breakfast. I stripped and bathed hurriedly, dressing again rapidly and smoothing out my rumpled clothes as best I could.

One of my pockets bulged insistently, and I put in my hand to find out the cause of it. To my surprise, I drew out the collar and necktie that had been so suddenly left in my hand the night before. They were much torn but seemed to be of good make. I put them carefully in my drawer, with some vague idea of looking them over more closely in the future. I was irritated that the bruise on my forehead had blackened during the night. But I had no time to waste over my personal appearance; so, opening my door, I ran down-stairs, with the guilty feeling that comes of the consciousness of having overslept. Nevertheless I was strangely light of heart. I was very thankful not to find Nancy waiting for me.

Some one was bustling about in the kitchen. It promised well. Probably Ephraim Bond had engaged us a servant, after all. At least the fire would be lighted, I thought; that was half the battle. With a fire I could make shift to get breakfast myself.

A little woman, done up in a great brown apron, was standing over the range as I came in. She turned a very rosy face to me, as she heard my step. It was a new, changed Nancy, the most absurdly delicious little housewife imaginable.

"Good morning," I stammered; "who made the fire?"

"I did, of course; there was no one else awake when I came down." She seemed faintly amused at my confusion. "I got along very well by myself," she laughed. "I hope you like eggs. I was afraid to try anything more ambitious. Besides, there wasn't a great variety of things in the cupboard. I shall have to do a great deal of marketing to-day." She hesitated a moment. "Have we any money?" With the question her color came, but she asked it sweetly and straightforwardly.

"I have fifty dollars," I replied. "Your uncle gave me a hundred. I suppose that more will be coming in soon. I wish, though, that we weren't going to have to use that money; I hate the thought of it to-day. Fortunately the fifty dollars is my own, about all I have left."

Nancy laughed. "I don't think that you need have any scruples about using the income money. I am sure that you have been doing all that a man could to earn it. Uncle Ephraim never pays for more than value received."

"Let us not talk of him," said I, "or at least, not until after breakfast. Let me help you. I think I can make coffee."

Nancy paused abruptly in her bustle of setting the kitchen table.

"Take off your gloves," she said. "No one ever heard of a man making coffee in gloves."

"But —" I stammered, and stood hesitating.

Nancy came over and stood squarely in front of me. "We might as well get over this foolishness first as last. Take off your gloves."

I unbuttoned one very slowly; it frightened me that she should see my hands again.

"Oh, take them off!" Then softly, and with her honest eyes looking into my shamed ones, "I am not afraid of your hands. I am very sorry, but I am not afraid. I am glad that they are all you have in your life to be ashamed of. You are too sensitive about your hands; you think too much about them."

I wondered why she thought that I had nothing else to be ashamed of; nevertheless I took off my gloves. I know that new sight of my hands in the broad daylight of the great, old kitchen must have come to her with something of a shock, in spite of herself, but she made no sign of distress, unless, perhaps, for a few minutes, she busied herself the harder with the table setting.

We made a merry breakfast of it. I vowed, and so, truly, it seemed to me, that Nancy fried the eggs more beautifully than eggs had ever been fried before, and Nancy said that never had French chef produced a more delicious cup of coffee.

Breakfast over, we made ourselves ready for the long walk to the village. Nancy had got a little old straw hat from her trunk, a relic of her school-days, that she had kept because she had been happy in it, and in spite of the heavy coils of burnished hair, she looked simply a bewitching school-girl as she pinned it on. I said as much.

She looked up at me, her face very rosy. "A young lady must look her best," she laughed, "when she takes the air with the lord of the manor, especially when he himself looks so great and strong, and haughty."

"That is not haughtiness," I said; "that is pride."

"Is there any difference?"

"All the difference between sorrow and great happiness," I answered, and I thought that some of my new-found joy of life was reflected in her eyes.

So we chatted happily with each other as we strolled down the winding sweetness of our own long lane. The day was a golden one, a wondrous jewel in the crown of spring. Yesterday morning — yes, only yesterday — I had thought, even in my weary loneliness, that the spring was very lovely. I had thought it beautiful, as I had sat amid the cramped burgeoning of Washington Square. To-day with the country stretched before me, a panorama bounded only by the horizon glimpsing ever and again through the tremulous foreground of the trees, it seemed as if I saw spring face to face for the first time. Perhaps one may never see the greatest beauty from lonely eyes, but must share the seeing with another really to see at all. Perhaps one is always partly blind, until some added greatness, some unselfishness of passion draws the veil from his eyes.

I drew a long breath. "Is it not wonderful?" I asked.

Nancy nodded, her eyes blue as the hills that held them.

"To think that this is all ours," she sighed at last; "that we are free to look and look, and draw rest and healing from it for as long as we like!"

I blessed her in my heart for the trick she was falling into of saying "we." If things could never grow from the level that they were taking on this our first day, even so, I could be happy, perhaps content. It seemed strangely unreasonable that I should even dream of love, when so great a boon as companionship had been granted my starvation. I glanced down at Nancy, wondering if her thoughts traveled at all the same road as mine. She was very pale, and her eyes had lost their reflection of the hills.

"What is it?" I asked in astonishment, for these recurrent fears of hers were beginning to make me uneasy, in spite of myself.

"Nothing," she said; "nothing." But she turned her eyes to mine with an effort.

I looked quickly about us, so nervous was I growing; but I saw no one; we were absolutely alone in our own lane, under the bright May sun. Then my eyes dropped from their searching of the meadows, and, of a sudden, I saw. In the path before us a brown derby hat was rocking softly in the dust.

I cursed myself that I had forgotten to look for it after my encounter of the night before. Now that I searched my memory, I could see very clearly the black silhouette of my assailant, as he had stood and fired, and he was bareheaded. No man would have gone roaming hatless about the country. If I had not been such a fool, had not been so startled with the roar of his revolver, I should have thought of this, and should have hidden away this intrusive witness of the night's unpleasantness. It was too late now, but I determined that Nancy should not remember it long.

"My friend seems to have been in something of a hurry," I said. But Nancy could call up no answering smile.

"You make too much of that little disturbance, young lady," I laughed. "I will throw the thing out of sight, and then we will think of something else. Your nerves have grown too acute; a few minutes of the sunshine, though, will put everything right with you again."

I picked up the hat from where the little breeze still rocked it in the dust, and tossed it behind the clump of hydrangeas that had sheltered me the night before, and we went on again on our walk to the village.

But the brightness had gone out of things, the close joyousness of being together had passed, for the time, beyond recall. I did my best to drive away the cloud, to bring the color back again to Nancy's cheeks, and she tried her best to help, to smile at the foolish things I said; but we could not manage it. So, after I had tried for some time, I bowed to the inevitable, and decided that at least it could not make matters any worse to question Nancy on part of all the things that I wanted to know.

"Perhaps, after all," I said, "you had better tell me now why you married me, why you were even willing to trust a stranger to —"

"There isn't so very much to tell," Nancy said, as I paused uncertainly. "I lived like any other girl until about five years ago, when my father lost his mind. My mother I scarcely remember at all. I was very little when she died.

"Until I was thirteen, my father and I lived alone together, alone except for my governess. We were very happy, for we were devoted to each other and great friends. Indeed, he kept me so constantly with him, and undertook so much of my education himself, my governess had very little to do. You see, I was about the only interest he had. He had been a banker before my mother died, but with the shock of her death he retired. He loved her so much that he had no wish to live himself, and if he had not been able to turn that love to me, I do not think he really would have survived her long. It is bad for a man to have nothing to do. His fortune was an old inherited one, and his business had never been more than a half-hearted occupation. With his sorrow he dropped it absolutely, and dropped his friends and clubs and acquaintances. I see now that it was bad for him, that he should never have shut himself away from the world; for year by year he became more of a recluse. He was active and spirited as a young man, I think. The blow of my mother's death crushed all that out of him. With me he was never morbid nor gloomy, only sweet and mild and gentle, as if the mainspring of his life had been snapped. Then when I was thirteen my uncle Ephraim, father's elder brother, came to live with us. And almost from the day he came things began to change in the house.

"I don't know why my father let him come, or why he let him stay, except that in his own sorrow he was filled with pity for any hurt or injured thing. He had inherited the bulk of the fortune, for my grandfather had practically disowned Uncle Ephraim for some youthful scandal that my father would never tell me about. He only said that we should be sorry for him, and that his ways were not our ways, and that he was quite poor now. But, little girl as I was, I wondered that my father, knowing what he did of my uncle, could fall so completely under his sway."

Nancy threw out her hands in a little gesture of defense.

"You see," she went on, "father was not himself. He had lost interest in the world, and his courage, the big, fighting courage I know he once had, was broken. As he had drawn away from the world and business he paid less and less attention to his own affairs, and though I am sure he did not love his brother, and that even his presence in the house made him uncomfortable, yet, once having taken him in because he was sorry for him, he found it more and more easy to cast his responsibilities on him. First, they used to have long talks together of an evening, talks from which my father came out looking worn and tired, and which gradually absorbed the time we had been accustomed to spending so happily together. They were business talks, he told me, and he used to sigh wearily, and complain because the money which he no longer cared for, so demanded his attention. At last, I know, he revolted, and gave all his necessary business into Uncle Ephraim's charge. It is queer how gradually such things come about. I remember how I used to pity my father for the work he had to do, until I almost felt grateful to Uncle Ephraim, whom I hated, for relieving him of it. But neither of us realized, until the time I was sent away to school, what a power he had become in the house.

"It was the last great test, and it showed how complete his influence over my father had become. I was the only thing on earth my father cared for, and my uncle was able to make him part with me. He told him, I remember, that he had been selfish, that no matter how well he was educating me, he had no right to withdraw me from the companionship of other girls; and although my father wept piteously and openly when he told me of it, he was too much under my uncle's sway to be unconvinced, and I was sent to a school which my uncle chose for me in a pretty suburb of Paris. I had been at school scarcely two months when I was recalled by a cablegram from my uncle. My father, he cabled, had received some sort of stroke. I was hurried home by the first steamer, but I never saw my father again.

" At first Uncle Ephraim said that my father was too sick to see me. No one saw him but his doctor and his man trained nurse, and sometimes, I suppose, my uncle. I lived for months in terrible anxiety, to be told finally that although my father was growing stronger, his long fever had so preyed upon his mind as to leave him actually unbalanced, and that the only hope of a cure lay in keeping him in the quiet of absolute seclusion. They all told me so, the doctor, my uncle and the nurse. I was sure it would have done him good to see me, to have had me to take care of him and to amuse him, but they were all very certain it would not, and I was only fifteen and now had not even my governess to advise me. So for five years my father lived in a closed room."

Nancy paused, her face turned away from me. I knew that she was struggling with her tears.

" Five years," she repeated softly, at last, " but now he is free again." She turned wet eyes to me and smiled. " He died six days ago," she said.

I tried, I suppose, to offer some poor consolation, for Nancy interrupted me.

" No," she said, " I am not sorry for that; I am glad. It was not then he died for me, but long ago. I am only glad now, glad that he is free, for he was more a prisoner than I."

"Than you?"

"For all those years," Nancy answered, "I have been kept close; I have never in all that time gone even for a little walk without my uncle or his man, Jonas."

"Do you mean to say," I cried, "that you yourself were not free to go where you liked? Why, the thing sounds impossible!"

"It would have been impossible if I had had any one in the world to turn to; but you must remember that I was all alone, that Uncle Ephraim really was my guardian. I could not believe at first that he would dare actually to make a prisoner of me. But it was very hard to be independent with Uncle Ephraim. He had a way of treating me like a small girl; as if he could never bring himself to realize that I had grown up. He punished me dreadfully for what he called indiscretions, indiscretions such as speaking to the woman who sat next me in the trolley, or stopping to chat with a little newsboy in the street. He would lock me in my room for days for such offenses, once or twice he even made me hold out my hand while he struck it with a ruler, and once, when I called to a girl of my own age from my window, after he had locked me in my room, he threatened to punish not only me, but my poor broken father also, and I had to give up my room for one in the back of the house."

"But, why did you stay?" I asked, as calmly as I could; for I was trembling all over in the suppression of my rage, in my pity for the defenseless horror of those cruel, lonely years. "Why did you not run away? Surely they would have helped you at your school, even the policeman on the block could have done something."

"I could not. Don't you see that I could not dare, that I could not risk that possibility, that poor father would be punished in my stead, and I thought Uncle Ephraim capable of anything, things worse than punishment. Oh, I could not go; he might even have killed him."

"But your friends," I protested stupidly, "your friends and his?"

Nancy smiled bravely up at me. "We had none," she replied. "Men, and even women, used to come from time to time at first, but they found father changed, I suppose, and gradually stopped coming. It is dreadful how soon a man can be forgotten, even a man of brains and wealth and position. Even before Uncle Ephraim lived with us people had stopped coming. And I had no friends of my own. The only ones I had ever made were at school, and they were mostly English and French girls. Only one other girl in school was an American, and she stayed there for a long time after I had left. She did come to see me, I think. Once, not so very long ago, I thought I heard her asking for me at the front door, but Jonas told her I was not at home and shut the door in her face."

"Jonas!" I repeated in astonishment.

"He has not been with us very long," said Nancy, "and my uncle employed him. He meant no harm, I think, and was only acting under instructions. I found none of our old servants when I came back from abroad, and Uncle Ephraim kept for ever changing the ones we had. I asked one of the maids, who seemed to care for me a little, to mail a letter for me to one of father's old friends, but she only gave it to my uncle, and I was punished for it. There was really no one I could go to."

It was more than I could bear. The sweet voice of my beloved sounded level and dead in its monotony of pain. I looked at her as she walked slowly beside me; her head was bent a little forward, and her eyes looked very tired, as they gazed, unseeingly, at the road before her.

"He shall pay for it all!" I cried out. "He shall pay for it now. He — struck — your hand! I will strangle him with mine! He shall have cause to think them the hands of Death!"

Her eyes looked into mine, wide at the sudden terror of the great passion that I could no longer hide, then tears came into them, and her hand fell timidly upon the tenseness of my arm.

"I am very tired," she said; "I don't think that revenge would make me happier. I want to rest. He is too strong for us, Mason. He has tied us very strongly, for whatever you did I should suffer for. Even if you could injure him, he could injure us. The strength of your hands would only bring you into the law, and you are my husband — or perhaps you are not. Don't you see that, whatever our relation is, he has tied your hands for ever with my name?"

I bowed my head, for it was true. Ephraim Bond would never have anything to fear from me; even if our marriage were illegal I was the more strongly bound. And then a great joy, a mighty wave of selfishness swept over me. Whether either of us would or no, Nancy was bound to me for all time. I had only meant to give all my help and all my love, but the situation had moved beyond my control. Because in the eyes of the world, we had lived not quite eighteen hours as man and wife, as man and wife we must live until death came to part us.

But I bore her greater love than that; I loved her too truly to be selfish very long. Perhaps, even yet, there was time to help her in a more unselfish way, and to frighten Ephraim Bond into his senses, to punish him in some measure as he deserved.

"Nancy," I said, "if our marriage was not legal, there is a way out for you yet. Scarcely any one has seen us, scarcely any one knows that we have been here at all. Suppose that I go back to New York alone and look into this business. If we were not really married I will go to your uncle, and tell him all that I now know. The witnesses of an illegal marriage would scarcely be at much pains to tell of what they saw. You could be happy, then, and free, for I could frighten your uncle into giving you anything that you wished."

Nancy said nothing, but kept walking slowly beside me. Far down the road I saw the dust of a wagon.

"We will have to stop now, if we are not going to be seen together. There is some one coming in sight now," I said.

"Are you unhappy?" Nancy asked. "Are you unhappy with things as they are?"

"You know that I am not," I answered. "I have never been so happy in my life."

"Nor have I," said Nancy, and her voice was very low but unafraid.

"Nancy!" I cried, and stopped short in the middle of the road. The wagon was coming over the ridge of the next hill.

"Well?" said Nancy quietly, but I thought that her voice shook a little.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "You mean that you are more happy than you have been in years; that is all you mean. Isn't it?"

"No. I don't know why, but I am more happy than I have ever been, more happy even than I was when my father was alive to me."

"But — oh, Nancy, you could not care to be near such a man as I am. Happiness in nearness means love, and you could never love such a man."

"Could you love me?" Her voice was very low indeed now.

"Love you? I love the very things that you have touched. I have never done anything else but love you, and fight against it, since I saw you in the doorway. Whether you love or hate me, I can never do anything else but love you. God forgive me, how should I dare to love you, and yet how can I help but love?"

"I think that I love you, too. Hush, dear, it is not wrong of you to love me."

"Nancy!"

"Wait, Mason; do not touch me yet. I want to be very sure. You and love have come so suddenly into my life, that I can scarcely believe it all. I must have a little time, a very little time, Mason dear, but I do not think that we need be afraid."

The wagon rattled up, and was past in a cloud of dust. I was drunkenly dizzy, and Nancy and I and the bright country around us seemed hazy unrealities; then, slowly, things straightened themselves about me, and with a great effort I regained some self-command.

"Very well," I said, "you shall tell me when you have had time to think, but do not forget what you are and what I am."

"I have never forgotten that," she answered.

"Then come," I said; "we have more errands to do than we shall possibly have time for."

So we walked along the road until we saw the town cradled in a little valley at our feet.

"I think that heaven must be in a valley," said Nancy.

I looked at her, and smiled. "Heaven," I said, "is not in any fixed place at all, but moves encirclingly about the wandering feet of Love." And that was the last time on all our walk that love was mentioned between us.

We did a great many errands, and it was very pleasant to purchase the little homely things that go to make up living. We bargained and bought, as if we had been buying pans and vegetables all our lives, and we returned laden with the lightest and most necessary of our spoils.

Once we were well home again, and Nancy was busy exploring closets, setting things to rights, and planning the disposition of the wagon load of things that we expected the next day from the village, I thought it a good opportunity to get the brown derby hat from its place behind the bush.

I ran down the lane, fearful that she would miss me, and that her thoughts would be again directed to whatever unpleasant channel they had turned at the hat's discovery.

I reached the bush almost out of breath, deciding, as I ran, that I would put away the hat with the collar and necktie, to examine some day more closely. But once behind the bush, I stopped, thinking that I had made some mistake.

But there could be no mistake about it. This was the only clump of hydrangeas in our long lane.

The hat had disappeared.

VII

CONFESSION

SOME two hundred yards behind the house was an orchard of old and contorted apple-trees, and through the orchard ran a tumbling, gossipy, little brook. We found it as we were exploring the place after breakfast, the next day, and such was Nancy's delight with it, that she would go no farther, but must needs sit down under the largest tree by the water-side, to contemplate at leisure the fairyland Spring had left in passing. There was a pleasant and remote detachment about the place which charmed us both. It seemed as far away from the clamorous bustle of the city as if it were on another planet, and even the quiet, little near-by town was unsuggested and forgotten. The place encompassed a life of its own, and seemed a small and isolated Paradise with no dependence on the outer world. The stream at our feet gurgled and laughed and ran between the lush growth of its gently sloping banks. From time to time a ghost-like, fleeting minnow would scurry past, an uncertain shadow in the broken water. From overhanging bush to overhanging bush an unseen spider had cast a filmy suspension bridge, a bridge which was splashed and jeweled by the rollicking water beneath it. Here and there, the stream was tripped and tangled with soft, submerged thickets of cress, which topped the water in lovely patches of dark emerald. Near us a luxuriant clump of cowslips reveled at the water-side, lifting upon thick stems wonderful, half-opened crowns of green-gold.

Nancy had brought with her a diminutive and dangling bag of pink flowered silk. Now, as with a little sigh she sat down under the apple-tree, she opened it and took out a square of embroidery, and deftly threading an impossibly small needle with a length of coarse silk, set about the absent completion of some flower unknown to botany. I have often wondered if fancy work was not more adornment than employment, an unconscious and decorative stage property, as foreign to its possessor as earrings, and without actual intent, serving much the same purpose. Certainly as she sat there, slim fingers busy with the work, I thought nothing on heaven or earth could be more charming. It seemed to me that nature itself held its breath watching her, that all the tender new-born beauty about us was only frame and background for her loveliness. The apple-trees, gnarled with the whimsical growth of years, twisted and roughened by sleet and sun and frost, seemed to have laid aside for her their sturdy work-a-day utility, veiling themselves in blossoms, every triumphant struggling line of them softened and disguised in a fresh, exquisite pinkness of bloom, as delicately nebulous and as dewy sweet as the cheeks of still-dreaming, half-awakened dawn. The whole orchard breathed of them — a faint, pervading sweet that stirred the senses like a fleeting memory of lost Eden.

The day was warm, and Nancy had welcomed it with a dress of some light, soft stuff of cloudy turquoise blue, to me a mystery of marvelous perfections; for it was cut low at the throat and caught together there by a great, old-fashioned, gold brooch, leaving her neck's soft contour free. Her head, bending over her work, or raised in happy contemplation of the beauty about her, was touched by the leaf-broken sunshine, which danced and shimmered on the heavy coils of hair, reflecting coppery gleams among the gold, or making spun gold of the dainty tendrils at her neck's white nape. Her eyes, a deeper blue than the spring sky, turned sometimes to the world about her and sometimes happily to mine, or bending to some intricacy of her work, were veiled beneath the long dark lashes, her delicate dark brows knit in a pretty perplexity.

As I looked down at her I forgot in a little while my fear of her in the wonder of it all; that she was here and very lovely, drove all other thoughts from my mind. She must have seen something of this, as she glanced up at me; for the color swept up over her white neck, turning her cheeks a deeper pink, and dyeing even the little coral ears.

"Well, Mason?" she asked.

"I was only thinking," I replied, "that you are inexpressibly lovely and that — well, I am glad that I asked you yesterday, for I should never dare to do it now."

"Oh," said Nancy, very softly, and bent with sudden industry over her work.

"You know," I said at length, trying to speak evenly, "that you said you would tell me to-day."

Nancy's silk got into an unexpected snarl, and she set intently about righting it. I was not sure that she had heard me. A little breeze whispered over the blossoms; a sapsucker fluttered from a near-by tree to the one over our heads, running in dizzy spirals about a big branch, and stopping to peer at us with his yellow striped head held hesitant.

"What have you decided?" I repeated. "Can you find it in your heart to marry me, Nancy?"

To my surprise Nancy smiled at me.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I think," I said, "that I want you more than heaven, that I can give you such a love as only a starved man can give, that somehow, in some way, with God's help, I can make you happy. But I think too that I am asking too much of you. I am bound by your uncle's terms, which it may or may not be right for me to break, to stay here out of the way of the world. I have nothing to offer you, nothing at all. To marry me would be perhaps to bury yourself here with me, to lose touch with things, to cramp your life in many ways, to exile yourself from all the laughter and little gaieties of the world, the myriad precious trivialities that make life for a woman worth while. You have seen so little of the joy of things, the sweetness of things, and the happy, careless fun of things, that you are too innocent of life itself to change them for the nothing I have to offer. But oh, Nancy, I can't help loving you, loving you and wanting you."

She got slowly to her feet and stood straightly proud before me.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"All?" I repeated vaguely.

"Yes," said Nancy, "because, if it is, I want you to listen. You do not know very much about women, Mason; nothing at all about me. Bury me here, you say? Take me away from the light and joyous and pretty things that women love? Offer me nothing in return? Do you think, can you truly think, that to be here with you would be that? Oh, I know what I have missed in life, little kindnesses, little friendships, little loves; but take them all together and what are they worth? These things do not spell life to a woman, Mason. It is the great friend and the great love that she wants. Home and a man, whose world she is, love and understanding, the laughter and tears of real every-day life, with the great life of every day, the secure tranquillity of night time, a hand to touch in the dark and true eyes to look into in the light, these are the things that make her horizon. Nothing to offer, Mason? No man can give a woman any more."

She threw out her hands with a little gesture as she finished and I caught them in both my own, till she swayed to me, hiding her misty eyes against my breast.

"Nancy," I whispered, and again breathlessly, "Nancy," and stooping, I gathered her up in my arms. All unafraid her lips met mine at last.

When we had been sitting for a long time under the tree together, and when we had planned our lives to very eternity itself, and I had been scolded and berated and forgiven for my blindness and stupidity, and the bird had flown away and come back to us again, a sudden and practical question occurred to me.

"*What?*" said Nancy, taking her hand abruptly from my shoulder and pushing herself off at arm's length.

But I was not to be twice chided with cowardice. "I can't see any gain," I said, "in waiting. If you are to marry me at all, why shouldn't you marry me right away?"

"Well!" said Nancy, "well!"

"Well what?" I asked. "If you have any good reason, you'd better tell me."

A little smile stirred at the corners of Nancy's mouth.

"No girl living," she said, "would consent to being married out of hand like that. If you want to marry me, Mason, you must wait for me."

"Wait?" I repeated blankly.

"Yes," said Nancy, "until to-morrow," and settled back again into the place she had left.

VIII

GONE

I MUST go, I felt, that very afternoon for our marriage license. Now that Nancy had promised to marry me on the morrow, she was as anxious about it as I was. At first we had planned to drive in in the morning and get the license together, and then go quietly to the nearest minister, but I was ignorant of such matters and afraid that it might be refused with the ink scarce dry upon it. It would be much safer, I thought, to leave a little margin, and when I got my license, find out beforehand what would be required of us.

I was reluctant, however, to leave Nancy alone, feeling all of a city man's doubt of the safety of the country, and disturbed by the thought of that night prowler, whose hat had but yesterday disappeared from our road.

I told Nancy something of my fears and to my surprise she took them quite seriously.

"I can go with you," she suggested.

"A pretty long walk, I'm afraid," I said, "and you know you are still a little tired from the walk we took yesterday. Perhaps though we could drive in."

"Go and try the neighbors," said Nancy, "and if you can't get a conveyance, perhaps you can get some one to come in and stay with me. There is really a lot of work to be done about the house, and I have no right at all to be taking excursions around the country. I'll go if you can get something to drive in, in spite of my conscience; but if you can't, I shall be perfectly happy, if only you can persuade some woman to come in and work with me for the rest of the day."

I made the rounds of my neighbors without very much success. The horses were lame, the horses were busy, there was plowing to do, and I think their owners looked with some suspicion on my city clothes. There was no telling how such a man as I would treat horse-flesh. They were all perfectly willing, however, to risk their women folk, and softened the refusal of their horses by offers of their wives. Finally I had to content myself with one of the latter. She was a large, pleasant-faced woman of middle age, sensible and assertive, who would inspire terror, I thought, in the heart of the hungriest tramp. She came with me with a readiness which, I am sure, was largely inspired by curiosity, a praiseworthy enough desire to know what her new neighbors were like. Nancy was charmed with her, and with a good heart I left them together, already engrossed in our new pails and brushes.

Doylestown, I found, was a little over five miles away. But what were five miles to a man on such an errand as mine? It was unbelievably wonderful that I, Mason Ellsworth, should ever be going on such an errand at all. And for a mile or so I went lightly, as one going in a dream and desperately afraid that he may awake to the cruel realities of every day. But overhead the sun was warm, lush field and meadow, sodden with the overnight rain, smoked with an earthy smell that brought to my city senses primal stirrings that thrilled through me like wine; birds were stirring cheerfully in the hedgerows and thickets, and from time to time, I would come upon a brown rabbit sentinel, ears slanted forward at attention, as if he said "Pass, friend," and then scurried off to herald the news along the road. After all, it was reality, solid, comfortable, healthy reality, and before I had gone half way I was striding the road like any soldier; love and the world lay before me, and come what might I felt strongly ready.

Although Doylestown was a little county seat, I had to inquire my way to the county clerk's office, and I thought as I did so that my informant looked at me doubtfully, as if he wondered who I was and what my errand. And the clerk himself, when I had given our pedigrees, as best I could and he had made me out our license, leaned toward me as one having gossip to impart and wishing more.

"Mr. Ellsworth," he said, "a friend of yours was asking for you here only yesterday."

"Of mine," I repeated wonderingly.

The clerk looked at me sharply. "I suppose he was," he said. "Unless you owe some one money," and he chuckled as if the observation had been the quintessence of sly humor.

"What did he look like?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know as you'd say he looked like anything particular. He was just a tall man, with good clothes, and a nose perhaps a little longer than the law allows. The only thing I really did notice about him was his cap. I did like his cap. It was just like one I have had my eye on for the last two weeks. I am going to step around and get it this afternoon."

The taste of the Bucks County clerk in caps did not seem to me a very enthralling subject. "Oh, you must have been mistaken," I said; "there is nobody about here that I know. It must have been some other Ellsworth that he was looking for."

"Well," drawled the clerk, "he asked for Mason Ellsworth as plain as paint. Wanted to know if I had heard either of you or of a young lady named Nancy Bond. Said he was the agent for some phonograph or other, and his firm had asked him to look you up." He eyed me for a moment shrewdly. "I did not take much stock in that agent business, though," he said; "somehow you can tell an agent when you see one."

"Mason Ellsworth, Nancy Bond?" Who in the world could be looking for us? Who in the world in this out-of-the-way place? No one but Nancy's uncle could, it seemed to me, know where we were; and yet this was evidently not Ephraim Bond. I had come very bravely upon my errand, but now I felt vaguely afraid, and my fear was the greater simply because it was vague. Of a sudden, I remembered the man in the brown derby hat, and felt that I was five long miles and over away from Nancy. "Thank you," I said to the clerk and walked out of the office as quietly as I could. It was agony to keep my measured step through the almost empty streets of the quiet, inquisitive little town. Once out of it, I started running and ran until I could run no more. So I went along those five miles that had seemed so short, running when I could, walking when I could run no more; fear growing in my heart with every tortured, panting stride. No vehicle of any kind passed me, and I hated the physical disability and lack of training that kept me from running every step of the way. But at last I came in sight of home.

There it lay across the rolling fields, peaceful and secure. Smoke was curling lazily from the great central chimney and the gray expanse of shingled roof was blotched irregularly with color, where pigeons sunned themselves in the glow of the late afternoon. How foolish I had been! Here, if anywhere in the world, was security itself. I had tasted of melodrama, to be sure, but, thank God, I had left it behind me in the city where anything may happen; here was only peace and quiet and the poignant happiness of ultimate tranquillity. I laughed at the thoughts that had stirred me and made up my mind that they should not trouble Nancy too. I was hot and tired and dusty, and I stopped in the road to make some disguising repairs to my dishevelment. I was dusting my shoes with my handkerchief, when there came a rattle of wheels and a shout, and I had only time to leap to the roadside, when a horse and buggy rounded the abrupt turn of the road and dashed past me at a runaway gallop in the direction I had just come. I turned to look after it; the buggy top was up and lurching drunkenly to the mad galloping of the horse. If I had not heard the shout I should have thought the runaway was driverless, and then to my amazement I could see far off the thin flicker of a lashing whip, as the buggy disappeared in a cloud of dust.

After all, I was tired and nervous; even this sudden chance awoke my fears again. I vaulted the whitewashed rail fence and started running across the fields, blundering through bits of bog, tearing impatiently through briers, and once or twice almost falling on the deceptive, uneven ground.

I made the veranda steps in a rush; the front door was open and I paused a second, gasping in the hall. "Nancy!" I called, "Nancy!" and stood sickly afraid. Though my voice echoed hollowly through the house and I knew, even as I called, that I was all alone there, that Nancy was gone, nevertheless, I ran up to her room, only to find it empty, and then started searching the rest of the house with an abandonment of terror which has since made me heartily ashamed. Empty room after empty room mocked and menaced me. A bit of embroidery lay on the dining-room table, and I snatched it up, as if, somehow, it might help me find her. I threw open the back door and called, and ran out of the house and through the orchard, calling, "Nancy, Nancy," to the empty world. Then, as when once or twice in my life I have had to fight, I grew of a sudden quiet, collected and cold, and went back to make a more methodical search of the house. It was barely possible, I reflected, that she had made an excursion to one of the neighbor's places, taking her helper with her as a guide. Then, before making the rounds of the neighborhood, I determined to look our own house over thoroughly; for, unless indeed she had gone somewhere with Nancy, I could not account for the disappearance of the woman I had employed.

I was not to seek her long, however, for as I reëntered the kitchen, I heard a sound which I must have heard before, save for the extremity of my panic, the drumming of fists on the inside of a closet door. The door had been locked and bolted from the outside, and my heart sank within me as I undid the lock, for I knew now that Nancy was surely gone. The woman, whom I had thought so secure a guardian, burst out upon me wrathfully.

"What did you mean by that?" she asked, her voice rising almost to a shriek. "Is that the way to treat any one? If it's a joke, it's a very poor one."

"Exactly what happened?" I asked her, when I had calmed her indignation somewhat.

"I don't know now what did happen," she said. "I thought it was you. Your young lady had gone up-stairs for some time, and left me to put paper on the closet shelves. While I was working in there, some one slammed the door behind me and locked it. It frightened me nearly out of my senses, and then I thought as perhaps you were one of those young cut-ups, and had done it for a joke."

"Did you hear any noise in the house?" I asked her.

"No, I heard nothing at all," she replied dryly. "I've been making all the noise myself I could hear at one time. Why?" she added. "Has anything happened?"

I saw she had no information for me and decided against letting her know of Nancy's disappearance.

"No," I stammered, "nothing has happened. I really must apologize," I blundered on, feeling that I was lying clumsily, "but I am afraid that I really did shut that door. You see, I'm very absent-minded. I don't remember doing it, but I suppose I must have. We had a closet at home very much like this, and we had to keep continually locking it to keep the cat out. I must have just shut the door and turned the key from force of habit, when I went through the kitchen; but I give you my word of honor, Mrs. Blake, that I didn't see you."

Clumsy as the falsehood was, it struck a fortunate chord.

"That's just like my father used to be," she said, "long about when he was ninety. He was so absent-minded, he'd go up-stairs to change his shoes and go to bed right in the middle of the day." She launched into a long series of her father's peculiar and absent-minded doings, which in my agony I had to strive to listen to quietly; for I was very anxious to get her out of the house, suspecting nothing, a feat which I finally accomplished by saying that Nancy was tired out and resting and that she wanted Mrs. Blake to be home in time to cook her own supper. Then I mounted the stairs again to Nancy's room. The late sun came levelly through the windows, lighting its farthest corner. One chair lay on its side, lace window curtains were disarranged, and a curtain cord had been ripped away with a force that had broken its old-fashioned hook. That was all. But that all was enough. Nancy had not gone of her own free will, and with murder in my heart I laughed aloud in the silent room.

This, then, was the errand of the midnight prowler, this the accomplished aim of the man, for he must have been the same, who had inquired for us at the county clerk's office. Who he was, whether an agent of Ephraim Bond's or not, whether or not this was all part of the original plan, I could not know, and for the instant did not care. It was enough for me that Nancy was gone and that she had been taken roughly. I knew that I should find her again, if I had to kill some one to do it; find her and bring her home. The next time this man came under my hands he should not escape so easily.

But on Nancy's bureau lay something white, a mocking sheet of paper that looked up at me. I read:

"I have changed my mind, luckily in time for us both. You must forgive me, but I find that I am unable to overcome an innate repugnance of physical disfigurement. I did not wish the pain of seeing you again, which, I am sure, you will see would have been a pain for us both, and so I am taking the afternoon train for Philadelphia. There I shall spend the night with friends, and in the morning take up the rest of the journey home. Forgive me and believe me, I am sorry. You are not to try to follow. That is absolutely final.

"NANCY BOND."

Even as I read it, I knew the thing was a lie. I had never seen her writing; but whether this letter was forged or whether she had written it herself, under the necessity of some compulsion, I could not decide; already, I was too sure of her to believe it. Whatever she might do, or had done, she would certainly never have made my hands the excuse for running away, nor indeed would she have run away at all.

The thing was outside the possibility of her moral courage. If, in my absence, she had decided for any reason that our proposed marriage was wrong, I was sure she would have waited for me, and told me that reason with gentle bravery.

I folded the note and put it in my pocket, then, with a sudden tardy thought, cursed myself furiously and aloud, for I remembered the galloping horse that had so nearly run me down, the swaying buggy, the lashing, cruel whip; Nancy must have passed me almost at our very gates, and I had stood gaping in the road and wonderingly watched her out of sight. What a hopeless fool I had been, and even now the minutes were flying. Again I found myself out upon the open road, running this time tirelessly and with a new-found strength. Evening had fallen, and here and there I passed toilers returning home. One or two called after me, but I kept steadfastly on my way until the town lights began to twinkle before me. Then, here and there, I stopped to make inquiries, fearing now at many turnings to lose the trail of him whom I pursued.

A lathered, foundered horse attracts attention anywhere, and I easily traced it to the heart of the town itself. My last informant vaguely thought it had gone through, but after that I absolutely lost track. It might have been abandoned in some field or lane, it might have gone on to any one of two or three towns; the fact remained that it was gone. It was agony not to go ahead, but folly to go ahead blindly. In the end I had myself driven home, to work out there a plausible scheme of pursuit. In the country the night comes with finality, the world is asleep, and he who travels must travel alone and uninformed.

IX

PURSUIT

FIRST of all, I ate something; for, now that I understood the blow, now that panic had crystallized into determination, I recognized that, the more serious the situation, the more need there was that I should be at my top level of efficiency. Then seriously I sat down to consider the matter.

After all, I was certain of only one thing, that Nancy had not left me of her own free will, and even here my certainty was a moral one. With morning I must be ready to find her, to go straight to her if I could; or, at any rate, I must have some definitely determined plan of action; nothing much is ever gained by a vague casting about for a trail. And, as at first I thought things over, it all seemed for the moment blind and hopeless. Then methodically I went back to the very beginning of things. Of a sudden I remembered the curtains that had stirred in Ephraim Bond's house, that unknown eavesdropper at our first meeting, whose arm I had grasped through the curtain folds and found unexpectedly strong. I remembered, too, Nancy's nervousness at the ferry, and the man in the brown derby hat, who had driven up just too late to catch our boat. How stupid and unnoticing a man in love may be; now was the first time that I connected this impatient man at the ferry gates with the skulking intruder of the night of our arrival, whose lost hat, rocking in the empty road, had alone been enough to cloud the happiness of the day for Nancy. Surely, I thought, here was the man.

Here was the man; but how was I further advanced? To be sure, I had seen him at the ferry. and had struggled with him amid the glimpsing moonlight of the lawn; but on neither occasion had I clearly seen his face, nor could I call to mind any memory of it. Yet, in all probability, it was he who had inquired about us at the county seat. Here was a man remarkable for nothing save a long nose. The fact that the clerk was very sure that then he wore a cloth cap, strengthened rather than weakened the probability. If the man I had struggled with, and who had lost that brown derby as he broke away from me, were the same, he would not have gone about the country bareheaded, but would have stepped in to a local haberdasher's to make some shift at replacing his loss. That he returned for the derby showed more a commendable caution than anything else; he must have been pretty certain that I had Nancy in my care, and, as he was definitely planning to take her away from me, risked a daylight search of the roadside rather than leave such a workable clue in my hands. And with the thought I got to my feet. After all, something was left; I need not start absolutely in the dark; for up-stairs in my bureau lay the torn collar and tie, tangible witnesses of our midnight encounter. I took the lamp from the table and climbed the stairs in search of them.

The door of Nancy's room was still open. How empty the house seemed! I closed my own door behind me to shut out the new and poignant loneliness, and to lock myself in to that familiar solitude to which I had grown perforce accustomed.

The collar itself was torn and rumpled, but evidently, as I had noticed before, of good make. I smoothed it out on the bureau before me, going over it minutely, as I imagined a Central Office man would do, and, to make things more clear, jotted down in my note-book what meager observations and deductions I could make. The size was sixteen; evidently my man was either stout or strong; for a matter of fact I already knew him to be the latter. It was marked in indelible ink, M. 48, after the custom of steam laundries, and there followed after this five upright marks in varying degrees of freshness, four of them grouped together by a cutting diagonal. These marks I took it were his own; I had known one or two men before with this same economical inquisitiveness, whose strange pleasure it was so to reckon the life of a collar. These marks simply meant that this particular collar had been laundered six times since its purchase, in all probability by the same concern. And as there were no other laundry marks than the M. 48 I had noted, this it seemed to me must mean two things; first, that my man had in all probability lived in one place for at least six weeks, and second, that in this case, he must have become a known and listed patron of some laundry.

The tie was plain enough, but bore the name of a fashionable New York maker, which I hoped meant that my man lived in New York, and that perhaps he might be known to the firm whose name the tie bore. I knew, at least, that fortunately they prided themselves upon the exclusiveness of their designs, that, even in their own shop, they sold but two or three of the same pattern, and I hoped that there I might chance upon a salesman intelligent enough, and with that uncanny trick of remembering a customer's face that salesmen sometimes acquire, to give me some information as to whom this tie actually belonged. Perhaps, even, it bore some distinguishing mark, indistinguishable to my untrained eyes. I rolled the two together very carefully, and stowed them away in my coat pocket.

Outside it was bright moonlight again; and I stood by the window for a moment, following with my eyes our winding road, and unconsciously searching the crisp black shadows for the intruder of two nights ago. Once it seemed to me that I almost saw him; then I recognized the absurdity of the thought and what a jangle my nerves must be in. But, nevertheless, although I smiled at my own foolishness, I took the collar and tie from my coat pocket, and tucked them under my pillow. After all, they were about my only clues, and I should keep them as safe as a traveler in foreign lands guards his money-belt. Then through sheer fatigue I fell asleep.

I suppose I slept soundly for an hour or two, until the first numbing edge of my weariness had passed; then through utter unconsciousness crept the vague and poignant stirrings of my anxiety. Nancy's face, white and terrified, came before me in changing dream and dream. It seemed to me that she tried to call but could not, that she was in some dim place where she believed my eyes could not find her, and that, finally, in her desperation unable to speak and struggling frantically in silence for my attention, she overthrew at last some unknown object with a crash. With a cry I awoke and sprang from the bed.

The first gray of morning was coming in the window, and birds were twittering and astir. The dim country lay in wholesome peace before me, and yet my mind surged with a living horror of the dream. Dully I looked about my room; the chair upon which I had put my clothes was overturned, and in the middle of the floor, piled one upon another, were stacked my ransacked bureau-drawers. Yet there was not a sound in the house.

As softly as I could I searched room after room; the house was empty from garret to cellar. My visitor, whoever he was, and there could be but little doubt of his probable identity, had made a safe escape.

I was angry that sleep had held me so soundly, and chagrined to think that this man, whom I would have given my life to lay my hands upon, had stood watching me as I slept, and had coolly searched my room for what he wished to find; but this chagrin was tempered somewhat by the reflection that his search had been in vain; for he could have come back for nothing save the collar and tie, which he left in my hands, and which I found still safe beneath my pillow. The very fact that he had come back for them gave them added importance in my eyes, for certainly their importance to me must have occurred to him, and must have strongly disturbed him, to have made him risk another return.

Then, too, he must have come alone; which meant that he had left Nancy in some other care; what care I could not guess, but was thankful for the necessity all the same.

It seemed to me that my best course of action, at least the only one that presented itself to me at the moment, was to go back again to the county seat, and, with that as a center, to start my search from there. I went about the house closing and locking the windows against my indefinite return. I had lived in it but two days, and yet the place was somehow home; and, as I made it secure, this very home atmosphere heartened me unbelievably. The place was undoubtedly meant for us; and I could not but believe that, sooner or later, my search would be successful, and Nancy and I would some day take up the quiet life there that both of us so sorely needed, and that both of us would find so sweet. As I locked the front door I hesitated about the disposal of the key. It was barely possible that Nancy herself might return in my absence, that, by some ingenuity of her own, she might be able to escape from whatever situation now held or coerced her. It would be bad enough for her to find me gone, at least she should not find the house locked against her. I smiled as I lifted the front door mat and dropped the key under it; any woman would look there for a key, either there or over the lintel of the door. Men, having pockets, do not expect to find the key of a locked house in any other place.

I turned at the gate to look back at the house. How still and quiet and waiting it looked! I felt as Adam must have at the Garden gate; the world's strife before me and paradise behind. But after all an empty paradise is not paradise at all, and I turned my back resolutely upon it, and set forth upon my indefinite journey. By great good fortune I found my nearest neighbor just about to start into town with a wagon load of farm stuff. He looked me over curiously enough, but consented to give me a seat beside him, when I told him who I was and where I lived. He considered it a good opportunity, I think, to satisfy a curiosity, which had evidently for some days been preying upon him. I fear, however, that I proved a poor source of information; I was so busy with my thoughts and plans that only with the greatest effort was I able to answer his constant questioning at all, and, even with all the will in the world, there was very little information that I had it in my power to give. His incredulous suspicion, when I denied knowing how much had been paid for the farm, would have amused me at any other time; as it was, I made the lame excuse that I was only the tenant of the real purchaser; I cared not at all that he did not believe me.

As we drew into Doylestown a new thought and fear possessed me. If, by that one chance in a hundred, Nancy should return to the house, would she not be frightened and perplexed to find me gone? Naturally, she would guess that I had gone in search of her, but she had no means of knowing when I would return. So, as my new neighbor drew up before the freight office, I borrowed an evil office pen and wrote:

"I have gone to look for you and I think I shall go to New York. A letter or telegram to me at the Gloria Hotel will reach me, and I will come back within a few hours.

"MASON."

This I sealed in a lading envelope and gave it to my Jehu.

"Would you be so kind, neighbor," I said, "as to push this under my front door?"

He turned it over in a puzzled sort of way. "Why, yes," he drawled, "certainly, but —"

"Thank you very much," I interrupted, seeing another storm of questions coming; "it is quite important and I know I can depend on you. Thank you for the lift, too." And leaving him agape with insatiate curiosity, I hurried away to the passenger platform.

There, as I had hoped, I found a policeman: most towns so display the force of their constabulary to the incoming traveler. This particular policeman I found a very satisfactory one. He was tall and wiry and thin, with a uniform which made but poor pretense of fitting him, and when

I came upon him he was leaning somnolently against a corner of the station. So that, at first glimpse, my heart sank, only to rise again at his first words, for he was plainly an exile, a down-Easter doing duty in a foreign land. I described Nancy to him, and made some attempt at describing the man in the brown derby. I told him that I had last seen them driving in a red-wheeled buggy, and to it all he listened with a lounging alertness, which was, I knew, the mask of a familiar New England sagacity.

"No," he said at last, "there ain't any elopers of any description taken train here either yesterday or to-day, and I am on duty about twenty-five hours out of the twenty-four. You see I am chief of police, and expected to do three men's work." He paused and scratched his nose reflectively. "I tell you what I should do though, if I was you. People eloping around in buggies are pretty apt not to go to the most obvious place. Now, about four miles to the east of here is Buckingham, where you can get a train either north or south, on the Pennsylvania, and about ten miles to the west is Souderton, where you can catch a train on another branch. I should say they might have gone to either one of them places; better try Buckingham, it's nearer."

"Thank you," I said; "I will."

"Say," he called after me, as I started off, "good plan's to ask around at livery stables." It was a good plan and I should have thought of it myself, had I been myself. I set off now in search of the nearest one.

"Yes," the proprietor told me, "I did rent out that red-wheeled buggy to a gent yesterday, and a fine state he brought the horse back in. It was all very well to give me a ten-dollar note, but no one can tell how much harm driving like that does to a horse; maybe you don't find out till weeks later. No, the gentleman was all alone; there wasn't no lady at all with him. Sure, I could let you have a rig and driver to take you over to Buckingham."

As I drove along the red Pennsylvania road to the little town of Buckingham, I tried to picture to myself, as best I could, just what the man in the brown derby had done; I knew that he had hired a horse in Doylestown, that he had driven to our farm and in some manner taken Nancy away with him; but some hours later he had returned alone with the buggy, which had evidently been driven fast and far; therefore he must have left Nancy in some other certain care, probably in the town from which he ultimately meant to take the train. One can't very well lock up a distinguished and beautiful young lady in a village hotel; so that the probability was that he had left her in the care of some trustworthy, private individual;

under what pretext I could not know, perhaps under none, providing the guardian he chose was dependably unscrupulous.

So at Buckingham I again followed the advice of my exiled policeman, and went first of all to the livery stable, and, to my joy, found out that the red-wheeled buggy had been put up there for an hour the evening before.

"Why, yes," said the stableman, "your party stopped in here about eight o'clock, and asked if I knew of any one who had lodgings."

"Was there a lady with him?" I asked.

"Lady," he laughed, "sure there was, two on 'em. They had the top up, and I couldn't see them very plain, but I should say one of them was young and slim, the other middle-aged and stoutish. I sent 'em around to Mrs. Lathrop's."

"Two ladies," I repeated, puzzled.

"Sure, only two, and there wasn't hardly room for them. How many was you looking for?"

"Two are quite enough," I answered; "I think I'll drive around to Mrs. Lathrop's. They are the friends I am looking for." And I left him staring at my recklessly large tip; for here was the third person whom my theory demanded, and without whom I could not explain the midnight return of the man in the brown derby.

X

MRS. LATHROP'S

MRS. LATHROP'S I found easily enough. It was a formal little white-trimmed yellow house of two stories, and it looked for all the world as if it had strayed from some toy village. It was set squarely in a little handkerchief of a lawn, and dwarfed and shaded by a towering giant elm. If it had been in the tree instead of under it, it would have made a very presentable bird-house; and Mrs. Lathrop, as she threw open the front door with a jerk and popped out to stand squarely before me on the door-sill, seemed like some small brown bird herself.

"You rent lodgings, I believe," I said.

She cocked her head and stood looking at me with her arms a-kimbo, her bright brown eyes searching, I thought, every detail of my appearance. "Sometimes to some people," she said; "very seldom to single gentlemen. Do you smoke?"

"Not in lodgings," I laughed, "and besides, I am not sure that I am looking for any; but may I come in for a moment?"

"Anything to sell?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing at all; but I think I should like some luncheon, if you can give me some. Now I want to ask you a question or so."

"Question?" she turned abruptly in the little hall. "The census man was here last week, and a suffragette the week before that, and the week before that a young woman who said she was getting statistics on the cost of living. It seems's if I'd answered enough questions to last out a year or so."

"My questions aren't personal," I explained, "at least not personal to you. But you had some lodgers here last night, I have been informed, who probably left early this morning, and, if you don't mind, I should like to ask you something about them."

"There, I knew it," she cried; "I knew very well that something wasn't right, and that somebody would be around pretty soon blaming me for it. What is it you want to know? Are you some friend of the doctor's?"

"The doctor?"

"Yes, that long-nosed young fellow in charge."

"No, I could hardly call myself a friend," I answered, "but there are some things I would like to ask about him and the ladies with him." I was strung and tortured with anxiety, and now that I realized that Nancy had been here but a few short hours before, I suppose that some reflection of my mental tenseness must have shown itself in my face, or perhaps in some quality of voice. Certainly, as Mrs. Lathrop glanced up at me, her whole manner changed on the instant.

"Land of love," she said, "there don't a year go by but I get stupider. Here's a young man most starved to death, and I keep him standing in the hall, as if I didn't care whether he ever ate or not. You come right out in the kitchen while I get you some dinner. Don't know's I'll ever have any sense."

"I think," I protested, "that I shall have to ask my questions first. I am rather worried about those people, and I'm afraid that I could not wait until after dinner to find out about them."

"Bless your heart, why should you? If I can't tell a bit of gossip in my kitchen, I certainly couldn't tell it anywhere. Breaking eggs and the news sort of go together. It takes a stronger-minded woman than I am to make any kind of answers with her hands folded in her lap. There's nothing clears the mind up as good as a saucepan." She pushed open the kitchen door as she spoke and we stepped from the dim hall into its flooding sunlight. "You sit right down at the table there and fire away; but, in the first place, how would you rather have your eggs?"

"It doesn't matter," I answered; "any way that is most convenient. I was told, Mrs. Lathrop, that you put up a gentleman and two ladies here last night."

"No," she said over her shoulder, "only two ladies, the doctor didn't stay, but he came back for them this morning. I certainly should not have taken them if I had known about them at the go off. Land knows, I need boarders bad enough, but I like them to be good plain every-day boarders, and not unfortunates and their nurses. I know I'll dream about that poor lovely little thing all my days. Do you suppose they're kind to people like that?"

"People like what?" I faltered.

Mrs. Lathrop banged down the stove-lid and turned squarely on me. "Suppose you tell me about them first," she said, "and what you want to know about them. I don't mind saying right here that I like your looks, and that I didn't like his; but he paid his bill fair and square enough, and it seems only right you should tell me what you want of them, before I, perhaps, make more trouble for that poor unfortunate child."

"I am afraid I can only describe one of them plainly to you," said I, "and can give you but a detail or so about the others. What they looked like is one of the things that I wanted to find out from you. I am looking for a man and two women; all I know about one of the women is that she is probably stout and middle-aged, and all I know about the man is that he is nearly as tall as I, has a long nose, and wore either a checked cloth cap or a brown derby." Mrs. Lathrop nodded.

"And about the young lady?" she asked.

"About the young lady I can tell you a great deal. She is not tall; I suppose you would say that she is barely of medium height. Her eyes are gray or blue or violet, you can never be certain which; and her hair is golden, not yellow golden, but the color of actual gold itself. She — I find it is not so easy to describe her after all. But she looks as if she had never grown to what she is, but as if God had made her so all at once, and loved what He made." I stopped, stammering.

"That will do," said Mrs. Lathrop; "now will you tell me, please, what it is you want with them?"

"I want to find them," I said; "I am not quite sure what I shall do with the man or woman. The young lady is my wife."

Mrs. Lathrop stared at me in round-eyed wonder, as if for a moment speech had been taken from her; and across the kitchen table she faced me squarely. "Is that true?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

For another moment she looked me in the eyes, then turned to her cooking with a clatter and fury unbelievable in such a little, bird-like person. Pots slid clattering to the back of the stove, which hissed and steamed with flying hot water, a dish fell from her hands and she stamped upon it recklessly; and of a sudden speech came to her in a perfect torrent.

"I might have known they lied," she said; "lied and triple-lied, that's the word. Doctor! He couldn't have doctored a horse; and she's a nurse! I thought when she first came in here, she looked as if she put more peroxide on her hair than on her patients. Nurse, Nurse! Whoever heard of a nurse with a face like a cast-iron lawn dog, and an expression that tried to look somewhere between St. Cecilia and a kitten, and only came out looking as if it belonged to the matron of a police station. *Her* a nurse, and I left her all night with that poor angel!"

"Nurse?" said I. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I thought you knew, but perhaps you don't. He told me first, the blackguard; and then she told me, and kept telling me, that that poor, lovely, little thing was insane; not violent you know, or I should never have taken them, but just that she had delusions, and that she had got away from the place where she was being cured, and that they had found her and were taking her back."

"Damn him!" said I. "Did he tell you that?"

"Amen, sir," said Mrs. Lathrop, "and it is just what he told me, and *she* added more to it, that 'nurse' did. And I, who thought all my life that

I had my wits, believed them. Believed them almost, that is. Thank heaven, I had a grain of sense left. Is your name Mason Ellsworth?"

I was striding the room now; but, with the abrupt question I stopped, my hand almost roughly upon her shoulder. "Yes," I said; "why? Did Nancy give you anything for me, any message that you have been keeping from me?" Mrs. Lathrop winced under my hand and, even in my mad excitement, I gathered sense enough to mutter an apology.

"Oh, that's all right," she said, "if I'd been you, I'd have drowned me, and small loss to a world of sensible folks; just you wait a minute." She dragged a heavy chair across the kitchen floor, and hopping up on it, stood on tiptoes to feel along the high shelf, and reach down a small brown preserve jar. "Here," she said; "take it." And as I took it and put it on the table, she hopped down again beside me, and taking off the cover with one hand, plunged the other into its brown, shallow depths. "Here," she said, "is the letter she gave me. Heaven only knows when the poor dear found a chance to write it, with that fat cat following around every minute. But she was clever too, and slid it into my lap this morning under her very nose, with a whisper to give it to you if you should come, and to write you if you should not. The woman caught her at the last part of it, and took the trouble to tell me later that it was all a part of her delusion; and I was idiot enough almost to believe her, and to have sat here all this morning, twiddling my thumbs, when I ought to have been down at the telegraph office. But I kept my mouth shut about the letter, because I was afraid it might get the little lady into trouble; and delusions or not, I liked her as much as I didn't like the other one the minute I set eyes upon her."

I unfolded the scrap of paper which she handed me. Nancy's note was pencil written and on an irregular bit of paper, evidently torn from the covering of a closet shelf or the lining of a bureau drawer. It read:

"They came while you were away. I did my best, but they took me. I think we are on our way to New York. They are pretending I am insane. Follow us there if you can, but be careful, for I fear, too, for your safety. He is very angry and capable of almost anything. He calls himself, now, Doctor Morrison, but, as you may have guessed by this time, he is my —"

"Was this all she gave you?" said I, glancing up.

"Why, yes," said Mrs. Lathrop.

I held the note to her, face down. "Have you any paper like this in the house?" I asked.

Mrs. Lathrop looked at it closely, feeling its quality between her finger and thumb. "It looks like shelf paper," she said after a moment, "and I have it pretty much all over the house."

"Then," I asked, "may I see the room where the ladies slept last night?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Lathrop, and led the way up-stairs, where she pushed open the door of a rather small, sunny room. "This is the room I always give to two ladies staying together," she said. "It is bright and cheerful and there are two beds."

Bright and cheerful it certainly was. Bureaus, beds, chairs and tables were alike white enameled; and the gay chintz window curtains matched the large-figured paper of the walls.

"May I look around?" I asked.

Mrs. Lathrop nodded. There was only one closet, and on its two shelves white paper of the same quality as that I carried in my hand lay undisturbed, and in each empty drawer of the two enameled bureaus I found fitted sheets, each, alas, intact. For a moment I stood puzzled, looking rather hopelessly about the room. This paper must have come from somewhere, I thought, and yet — Then I noticed a small table by each bed, little square stands that people use, I believe, for a night light or drinking water, each with a shallow drawer for near-at-hand necessities. And as Mrs. Lathrop stood interestedly watching me, I pulled open the drawer of one, and found it absolutely bare.

"Were not these lined too?" I asked.

For answer she pulled open the drawer of the other, and held up a small oblong of the white paper.

"But this one is empty," I said.

"Then it is empty since last night," Mrs. Lathrop answered; "for I went over the room carefully yesterday morning."

Here, then, was where Nancy had found paper for her note. That, at least, was pretty sure; but nevertheless my heart sank with a great disappointment. The letters of the note in my hand were written stragglingly, and once one line actually rose and lapped over the line above it, as if it had been written by some blind person. Evidently Nancy had been watched very closely indeed, so that her only opportunity for writing this note to me had been some time during the terrors of her long night, and she had written in the dark. In the dark, too, I imagined, she must have torn away the written portion of the sheet, taking her chance as she could, perhaps trembling with the slight tearing sound of the stiff paper, and in her nervous haste leaving a portion of her note still in the drawer. No, after all, she would not quite have done that; if she had been careful enough to write to me, it did not seem probable that she would have left a sheet with a torn corner behind, as a certain indication of what she had done, should her guarding dragon look through the room in the morning.

I sat down for a moment on the edge of the bed, trying to imagine what she would have done. Then I glanced over at the fireplace; it was clean and empty.

Mrs. Lathrop was watching me with interest. "No," she said, shaking her head; "no burnt paper."

Perhaps, I thought, the dragon *did* find the rest of the sheet; but if she had done that, she would have suspected the note itself, and would either have got it away from Nancy or questioned Mrs. Lathrop about it. It seemed more probable then, as I thought it over, that Nancy had softly slid the sheet from the drawer, and had drawn it under the bed-clothes, where she might crumple it to a ball in silence. I got up and leaned out of the window; there was not a scrap of paper upon the little lawn.

"What are you looking for now?" asked Mrs. Lathrop.

"I thought," said I, "that she might have crumpled up the rest of the sheet and thrown it out of the window."

Mrs. Lathrop had been standing, now she sat down with a gasp. "Now, for certain, you'll think I'm the biggest idiot in the world," she said. "There *was* a little ball of paper on the lawn this morning. I suppose I am a tidy soul, Mr. Mason, for I didn't think anything about that paper at all, except that it was on my lawn, and I put it — dear knows, I am afraid to tell you — into the stove."

The little bird-like face was pink with self-indignation, and I think her disappointment was only less than my own.

"Well, it can't be helped," I said. "At least we know now how the note was written, and I can tell you I am glad of any news at all. What is the first train I can get from here to New York or Philadelphia?"

"There isn't one in either direction for an hour and a half," said Mrs. Lathrop, "and, good sakes, we have both of us forgotten about dinner."

XI

THE GUESTS

OVER my luncheon, or dinner, as Mrs. Lathrop preferred to call it, my hostess told me everything that she could remember. She was a keen little woman and a sympathetic one, and when I told her that Nancy and I had been married but a day or so, her indignation, already very much excited, knew no bounds. She said that about ten oclock on the evening before, the red-wheeled buggy had drawn up before her gate, and that a man describing himself as Doctor Morrison had rung her bell and asked if she had lodgings for the night for two ladies. He himself, he had explained, could only stay for supper and would return for them in the morning.

"I didn't like him very much when I first saw him," she said, "and I certainly shouldn't have taken him all by himself, and so late at night. But, after all, Mr. Ellsworth, I have lodgings to let, and, late or not, I could hardly turn two ladies away from the door; but I should very much have liked to before we got through supper.

"As soon as he found I had a room he went back to the buggy and whispered for a while, and then the two ladies got out of the carriage and came into my hall, the doctor and the nurse, as I can't help calling them, walking on each side of the young lady. It was not until the doctor had gone to put his horse in the stable, that I really got a good look at the other two. Dear, dear, but it puzzled me. The young lady (and you were right in saying that she was lovely), looked white and frightened and as if she had been crying; and her pretty dress was torn at the neck. And all the while, as they stood there in the hall, the other woman kept a hand on her arm and looked as if she was daring her to say a word. I tell you I didn't like it at all, but here they were, and I showed them up to their room. Pretty soon the doctor came back, and I liked things still less. He's an ugly one, is the doctor, and you can take my word for it. Have you ever seen him?"

"No," I answered; "only once, vaguely, and in the moonlight."

"You know then," said Mrs. Lathrop, "that he is almost as tall as you are, with great heavy sloping shoulders and queer broad stumpy hands. His hair was black and not very thick and grew down low in the middle of his forehead, in what I think is called a widow's peak, and what with the long nose under it and eyes too small and near together and that queer, mean, little baby mouth of his; I can tell you I was sorry I hadn't slammed the door in his face."

Here at last was some picture of the man to go upon.

"How was he dressed?" I asked.

"I don't exactly know," said Mrs. Lathrop. "I remember that he did have a brown derby and that his clothes were brown too; smooth, I think, and with a narrow stripe. He wore a ring with a sort of pointed purple stone in it. All his things looked as if he had plenty of money. Still, I think I hated the woman more. Perhaps a woman always does hate a woman more, when she's hating at all. I thought she was fat at first, but she wasn't, only heavy and broad and strong, with a square mannish face and a silly mop of chorus-girl hair over it.

"No one said very much while they were eating their supper. The two of them had the girl between them, and talked across her, while she said nothing. Once or twice the doctor raised his thin eyebrows at me, as if he meant me to understand something he didn't want to say at the moment. He had caught me looking at the girl, poor dear, I suppose, and all he could think of was to make a mystery of it; for it was pretty plain that she was frightened and unhappy, and once, when she raised her hands from her lap, I noticed a red mark about her wrists, as if they had been tied together by a cord. So, when he came out into the kitchen to pay me, I asked him about it.

"'Perhaps I should have told you about it, Mrs. Lathrop,' he said, 'but there are things that one does not speak of unless it is absolutely necessary. This young lady has run away from a sanatorium, and her nurse and I are bringing her back. It would have been better if some one of her family could have come with us, but they are all abroad at present.'

"'Do you mean to say,' I asked him, 'that that lovely little thing is out of her mind?'

"'Only slightly, Mrs. Lathrop,' he told me; 'we hope to have her well in a year or so. Absolute quiet and modern treatment work wonders, you know. She imagines that she has been married, and will probably tell you so if she gets the chance.'

"'Well, she wears a wedding-ring,' said I. That made him scowl at me, Mr. Ellsworth. It was pretty plain he thought I was too inquisitive; but I am not one that minds other people's scowls much, and I guess he saw that he was doing the wrong thing. So, finally, he told me that they let her wear it to keep her quiet, and I more than half believed it, because you couldn't tell from her face whether she was married or not."

"Then he went in and whispered to that nurse a few minutes, and went out without saying another word to me. Pretty soon after that the ladies went up-stairs to bed." Mrs. Lathrop paused and sighed, and I, too, sat silent, impotently angry at the thought of the night that Nancy must have passed, and must pass again, for how long I could not say. I looked up to find Mrs. Lathrop staring at me in astonishment.

"What is it?" I asked.

Mrs. Lathrop chuckled. "Do you know, Mr. Ellsworth, that all this time you have been eating dinner in your gloves?"

"Why, so I have," I said, "but I am quite through now, so the harm is done."

For two days I had forgotten my hands, and this sudden reminder startled me, bringing back with a rush, as it did, the accustomed pain of my affliction; and yet this time a new thought and feeling mingled with the bitter old one; for I glanced down at my gloved hands and remembered how strong they were, with what a compensation, poor though it was, of unusual physical power they were endowed, and the reflection heartened me. I would bring my purpose to the level of my physical efficiency, and, matching sheer strength with sheer determination, knew that no world as small as this could hide my love away from me, nor him, who had taken and frightened her, from the inevitable terror of my grasp. In all my life I could remember putting forth my strength but once, and then it was my boy's strength.

The picture flashed grimly before me now, as I sat gazing at my gloved hands, standing on the instant clear and distinct before my mental vision, as such pictures will. It had happened at school, when I was a second-former and fourteen years old, I think. I was a new-comer, and, as I have said, not popular. One of the sixth formers, a great meddlesome fellow and the terror of the smaller boys, had stolen into my room at night, to drag me out to the hazing that most new boys, and all unpopular ones, received. I was asleep, and he had pinioned me so close and so suddenly, that I awoke with a start, and yet was unable to strike; but in the darkness and in the confusion my fingers met his throat and only tightened there, it seemed to me, for a moment. Yet he had fallen across me in the dark, with twitching body and breath that came so raspingly that, as I grew wider awake, it filled me with concern, and I had struggled from beneath him and made a light. His eyes were half open, half shut, and his face strange and blotchy. I remember that I called the master of our floor, that there was a scurrying of feet and a general lighting of lights, and a silly confusion.

The doctor had come and spoken of "crushed bones in the throat." He was around again in a week or so; but only the fact that it had happened in my own room saved me from expulsion. I could get no one to believe that I had but gripped him for a moment, when I was stupid with sleep. But it was the last physical trouble I had in school, and I had never used my strength to the utmost since that time. It had grown, I knew, but I never thought much about it; my hands had made me shy, and though I had hoped in vain for friends, at least I had never had an enemy, never had an enemy until now; but hate had come into my life almost hand in hand with love.

I looked up to find Mrs. Lathrop staring at me across the table. She colored, but kept her eyes bravely upon mine.

"If I was you, Mr. Ellsworth," she said, "I should go a little easy. That doctor deserves a good beating right now, but it won't help either you or anybody else to kill him."

"Kill him?" I questioned.

"Yes," she said; "isn't that what you were thinking about? You have been sitting there for the last five minutes looking like battle, murder and sudden death."

"I don't wonder the doctor thought you observant, Mrs. Lathrop," I said. "It's all right, though. I'll remember not to kill him, although it will be pretty hard, once I get my hands on him."

"Well, I hope you do give him a good scare."

"You have asked me why I did not take my gloves off, Mrs. Lathrop. I keep them on because people find my hands unpleasant."

Mrs. Lathrop smiled incredulously. "Do just as you like," she said, "but I shouldn't be afraid *I* should think any such thing, if I were you."

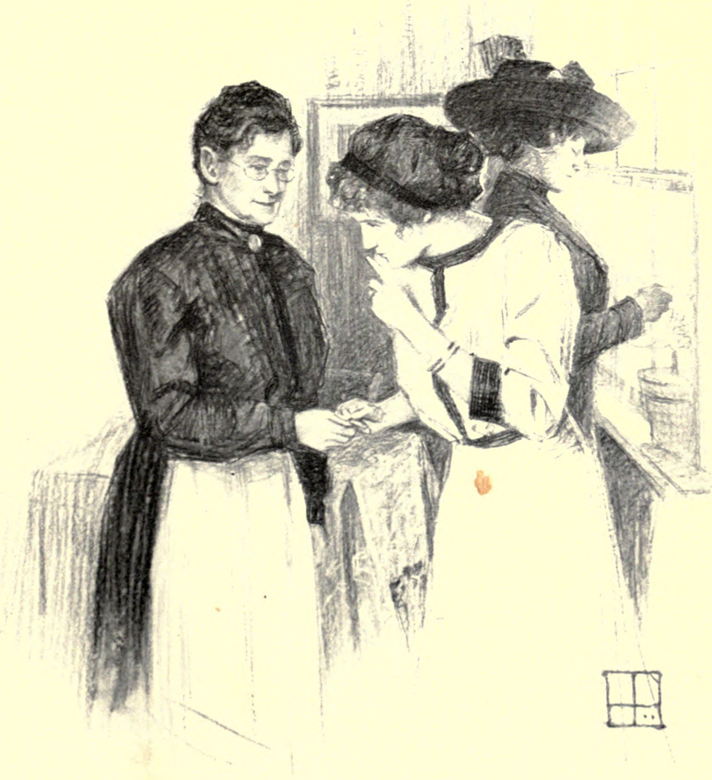
I stripped one glove away, because I had had enough of the subject. To my surprise her face showed no flicker of astonishment.

"Well, take off the other," she said; "they don't trouble me any. What a queer young man you are! Do you expect a woman of my age to faint because your hands are a little marked? Some folks have stick-out ears, but they don't go around in ear tabs."

I took off my other glove.

"When did Mrs. Ellsworth give you the note?" I asked, after another little pause.

"This morning, just before the doctor came back for them. The nurse was looking at her watch and getting a little uneasy, I think; for every now and then she got up and went over to the window to look up the road. It was on one of these window trips she made, and while she had her back turned, that the young lady slid the note into my hand. I was going through the room, when she stopped me with her finger on her lips. I smiled and kept quiet, because, as I say, whether she was right in her mind or not, I liked her. And when



Will you please give him this?

I stopped she put one hand up to her hair and drew out that note, which was all rolled up like a pencil. 'If a gentleman called Mason Ellsworth comes,' she said, 'will you please give him this?' And to please her I took it and smiled again. She would have told me more, I think; but just then that woman turned from the window and saw us together. In about five minutes the doctor came, and though she tried hard she didn't get another chance to speak to me, and, for that matter, it wasn't barely five minutes before the two of them started with her to the station, which is where you'd better be starting now, Mr. Ellsworth, to be sure and catch your train. There is one in twenty minutes for Philadelphia, and unless they started early just to fool me, it was a train for Philadelphia they took themselves."

"You've been very good to me, Mrs. Lathrop," I said, "and I do not know what I can ever do to repay your kindness both to me and to my wife."

"I do," said Mrs. Lathrop. "You can write to me when you have found her."

XII

THE COLLAR AND TIE

FOR a happy man green fields and country lanes, pastoral sights and the murmurous harmonics of nature lend themselves as a fitting and tender glory to his happiness. Serenities echo back serenities, and the great and happy heart of nature beats in blissful accord with his own. But for a man whose happiness has been disturbed, whose life has been touched by care or sorrow, these accorded sights and sounds of the country are oppressive madness, and the very greatness of their eternal quality plagues and vexes him the more. For the country is never out of tune with itself; its music is one vast elemental chord and has been the same for all time. So the man out of tune with himself and with the world finds the clanging discords of the many-noted city a shock of vigorous relief. Here is not one great melody, but rather the vigorous uproar of a thousand tunes; where the sane country would have driven him mad, the mad city shouts him back to sanity.

My little cross-roads local drew into Philadelphia like a farmer coming to the fair. And as I stepped into the busy turmoil of the station and shouldered my way through the hurrying impersonal crowds, every moral fiber in me took tonic and vigor from the hurly-burly about. A wise man has called man's relations with his fellow beings "antagonistic coöperation," and the phrase is a miracle of inspiration, for we shrink from the touch or too-intimate glance of those about us in instinctive resentment, and yet no healthy person wishes himself very distant from this human intimacy. Each one of us feels that he seeks his lonely goal alone, yet feels that he has lost his way, unless he moves with the crowd down the same great road. And even to communicate with those about us the simplest thought is only half told in many words. When all is said and done, love is the only language that ever makes one being comprehensible to another. With Nancy I had been happy for the first time in my life; with Nancy gone, this jostle of humanity awoke in me a militant confidence and a potent belief that I should find mine own.

It was, therefore, with almost a feeling of elation that I set about my task, and, as is usual with confidence, my first move was the right one.

"I wonder if you remember," I asked the Pullman agent, "a man in a brown derby hat who came to you this morning, and probably wanted a private compartment to New York; a tall man with sloping shoulders, a large nose and eyes set too near together. He was dressed in a brown suit with a narrow strip, and may or may not have had two ladies with him."

"Sure," said the agent; "what about him?"

"I want to make sure of him," I said. "Where did he go — to New York?"

"That's where he engaged his state-room to," said the agent. "You mean the man with the insane young lady and the trained nurse."

"Oh, he told you about that, did he?"

"Yes; you see we have only one state-room, and that was engaged; so he explained about the young lady to me, and I moved the other people. We have to do that once in a while. It saves the other passengers annoyance."

"Doubtless," I answered, and hurried off to get my ticket for New York.

I had only a few minutes to wait for the train, and it was a good one.

New York, when I got there, I found in the drizzle of a late spring rain. It was only about half-past five, but under the dark sky seemed already evening; so that I made what haste I could to find a quiet little hotel I knew, where a comfortable room could be had at a small figure, and where I felt enough at home to compose myself quietly for the task before me. My best working clue, it seemed to me, was the torn collar in my pocket; and that evening after supper I took a classified telephone directory up with me, and made a careful list of those laundries which seemed near enough to the fashionable zone to justify the mental picture I had of my man. I realized, of course, that this list might omit the place I was looking for, but there was a strong probability that it did not, and the very making of it gave me something comfortably definite to work on. I cut, and revised and added to it; but prune it as I would, when I went to bed that night, my note-book held the formidable array of over sixty names. I had an appalling day's work ahead of me, an Augean task that haunted my dreams, and brought me down to breakfast in the morning to a dining-room where the waiters still blinked with sleepiness, and huddled, nondescript scrub-women were but finishing their aromatic task. This was a dreary enough beginning to my day, but coffee heartened me, and outdoors the new-washed world preened itself resplendently in the tender brilliance of the spring sunshine.

I walked to the nearest corner and stood there taking deep breaths of the winey air as I watched the streets for a vacant taxicab. Taxicabs are a luxury I am not much given to indulging in, but the work before me imperatively demanded one, if it was ever to be finished. I had arranged my list in some sort of plan; but, even so, I must travel far and make many detours. In the meantime, as I stood waiting, I gathered myself together for the work of the day. Few people, I suppose, actually realize that New York City is one of the finest coast resorts in the world. Its very internal greatness has made them forget the natural beauties of its situation. But as I stood there on the corner taking great breaths of the scented May-time, a little, sturdy, swirling breeze dropped from the heights above me, which was as redolent of salt and the tang of open sea as any breeze that ever swept in from ocean through the Narrows to stir the ancient solitudes of old Manhattan Island. And in spite of all my tense anxiety and distress, this illusive, magic potion of sea and spring awoke that indefinable something in me which comes to every man, once or twice in the year,— that vague whisper from his own soul, perhaps, as illusory and faint and fleeting as a breath upon glass, that seems to promise, for the moment, to make clear the mystery of life itself, and in the moment is gone, to leave him only a reasonless impression of some power and faith and beauty beyond his daily ken. Strangely enough I found myself listening half-expectantly for the words of a song that for a moment I could not recall; then suddenly I knew what they were, that little, soaring, all-triumphant song of Pippa's:

"The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in His heaven —
All's right with the world!"

Nancy was lost but I should find her; wherever she was, I knew that she thought of me and loved me; knew that in spite of pain and sorrow and suffering all was right with the world.

Because he was dour and glum and dirty, I let one driver with a perfectly good taxi pass me unsignaled. His successor I chose with satisfaction; for he was a smiling and rosy young fellow, as spick and span and debonair as the driver of an English four-in-hand, and, like that mighty person, bore himself with a jaunty, assertive professionalism and sported a boutonniere of violets.

"Are you game for a job that may take us almost all day?" I asked him.

"Right-O," said the driver, and threw open the door.

I am afraid that we broke the speed law continually, but a thousand others must have been breaking it too; all the world goes faster and more vigorously on such a day. We dodged in and out of heavy traffic, skidded about corners, and stopped, when perforce we must stop, with a miraculous and not unpleasant abruptness. It got to be a kind of routine; as I got out at one place I would give him the number of the next, and having made my inquiries would find the tonneau door thrown open for me, and the cab leaping forward even as I sprang into it. And although place after place I drew blank, yet we seemed to move forward with such a swift fatality, that no single failure, or series of failures, seemed important or discouraging.

Once, in the neighborhood of Madison Square, we made a detour to visit a haberdasher, whose name the scarf bore; but there, also, I failed. I was right, they told me, in supposing that they made few ties of one design; they had made only twelve of this particular silk, but it was a year since they had had it in stock, and they could not in the least recall the customers who had bought them. Indeed, they sold many things to people who were not rated as regular customers of the firm, for their reputation was somewhat national, and transient visitors in New York from all parts of the country were apt to drop in and make a few purchases, as a regular part of their schedule of "doing the town."

"But if you could in some way find out the gentleman's name, sir," the manager politely told me, "we should be very glad to inform you whether or not the gentleman is on our books, and perhaps supply you with his address."

This I considered good-natured of the manager, and more than I had any right to expect; for the torn tie and my possession of it evidently made him curious, and yet I neither told how I came by it, nor why I was so anxious to find its owner; and in addition I did not trade there myself, so I think it must have been the day which had something to do with his unusual attitude.

It was not long after this, however, that I first picked up the trail of the laundry I was looking for. I had got well up-town, and the distances between the stops were growing shorter and shorter, when I found a man to whom my collar and its mark of M. 48 meant something.

"That wasn't done here," he said, "but I can tell you where it was done. I happen to know, for I was once foreman in the place. You go to Slater's, on Park Avenue, between Seventy-fifth and Seventy-sixth Streets, and they will tell you whom that collar belongs to in two jiffies."

"Speed her up," I said to my driver. And although it seemed to me that he was going more slowly than before, yet I think he must really have been hurrying; for we were stopped at Sixty-eighth Street by a traffic policeman, who lectured him long and with impassioned fervor, and told us the only reasons why we were not arrested was that he had never seen my driver before, and that for the moment he couldn't be spared from his beat. Through it all I fidgeted like a man going to catch an ocean steamer; for, now that this part of my search was so nearly at an end, I became suddenly impatient and filled with a new anxiety. Slater, I thought, might be going out at any moment and we would not find him. He might be even going into the country, so that I could not see him that day; and perhaps no one else in the establishment would have the information I wanted, or having it would dare to give it in the proprietor's absence.

With a sudden twist the taxicab drew up before the number I sought. But evidently there had been some mistake, for the place was a confectioner's shop.

"Can you tell me," I asked the cashier, with an abruptness that must have surprised her, "the address of Slater's laundry? I was told it was on this block."

She made change for a customer before replying.

"It used to be right here," she said, "but he went out of business a month ago. There ain't any Slater's laundry."

XIII

THE RENDEZVOUS

IT was a possibility that had never occurred to me, and came to me much as if I had stretched out my hand for some tangible object of which I was perfectly certain and found only the mockery of illusive shadows. "Gone out of business!" The thing seemed incredible.

"Do you actually mean that?" I asked after a moment, "or hasn't he just moved to some other place?"

"I don't know," said the cashier. "Of course I never saw him myself. I only came in here from our down-town branch after the place was in working order. But what they told me was that he had gone out of business."

"Well, what's his home address?" I asked.

"You've got me." All this in asides as she mechanically made change for an intermittent stream of customers.

"But he must get letters here that you have to redirect. Where do you send them?"

"No, he doesn't. They never get this far. All the redirecting is done in the post-office, I guess.

Most firms send down a rubber stamp with their new address on when they move, you know. It saves time, and besides, it's safer."

"I suppose I could get his address from there," I said, rather hopelessly.

The cashier was evidently a little bored. "No, you couldn't, Mister," she said, looking with absent satisfaction at her finger-nails; "the post-office never gives out an address. But I'll tell you what you could do. You could just send your bill in to this address, and the post-office will see that it reaches him somehow."

"Thank you," I said; "I suppose that will have to do."

As far as I could see, that was the only course left to me at the moment; so I had my taxi take me back to the Hotel Gloria, and there I wrote Mr. Slater a letter asking if he could make an appointment to see me on a matter of the greatest importance. This once posted, I was at a loss what to do next. I knew I could not get an answer before twenty-four hours, and that there was a great possibility that I should not even get an answer then. In the meantime I felt every fleeting second precious and inactivity an unendurable torture. I had inquired the evening before, and this morning, and when I had come in, for any message from Nancy, and had met expected disappointment. To hear from her here meant, I knew, that she had got home again, the one stray chance in a million; yet, half unconsciously, I hoped for it. And every "nothing for you, Mr. Ellsworth "of the hotel clerk's was fresh disappointment. Now, as I paced my little bedroom, I racked my brains for some further activity to fill the day, for surely, it seemed to me, there must be many ways of finding Nancy if I could only think of them. Yet I had but two clues, as far as I could see: one, my rather uncertain knowledge of the appearance of Nancy's escort, and the other the collar and tie in my pocket. I could think of nowhere that I might inquire in a place as large as New York City for these people I sought. To be sure, I might advertise for them, but such an advertisement would be just as apt to fall under the notice of the people who had taken her as under that of some other person who might chance to be able to direct me to them; and above all things I did not wish to frighten Nancy's abductors, nor to serve any such open challenge upon them. Then it occurred to me that at least there could be no harm in advertising for the whereabouts of the illusive Mr. Slater, and that there was still time to get such an advertisement into the late afternoon papers. So for an hour I went from newspaper office to newspaper office, arranging for the insertion of this journalistic arrow I was shooting into the air.

"Information is desired as to the present whereabouts of Oscar Slater, late of 6— Park Avenue.

Address Mr. Tyler, Hotel Gloria."

I also arranged that my advertisement should appear in three morning editions. At the Gloria they had known me for some time, and the desk clerk readily agreed to my innocent subterfuge of "Mr. Tyler."

I was at dinner when the first and only answer came. The desk clerk brought it in to my table himself.

"How did this come?" I asked him.

"By messenger," he told me. "I meant to keep the kid so that you could question him, but as soon as I had receipted for it, and turned my back a moment to get some one his room key, the little imp slipped out. I am sorry I was so careless."

"Well, it can't be helped," I said, and tore open the envelope. The note inside was type-written and on a single, unfolded sheet of paper. "If Mr. Tyler will come this evening," it read, "to the saloon on the northwest corner of Seventh Avenue and Fifth Street, and carry a book under his arm for identification, he will meet some one who will tell him, for a consideration, the present whereabouts of Oscar Slater." There was no signature.

"What do you think of that?" I asked, as I passed it to the hotel clerk.

He glanced it over and laughed. "I think," he said, "that it is a palpable fake. It's from some crook who probably makes his living by answering just such advertisements as yours. He is at the other end of this thing and, without the slightest information, is going to take a flyer at trimming you. Who is this Slater, anyhow? There isn't anything mysterious about him, is there?"

"Mysterious? No," I said. "Slater is a man who till six weeks ago kept a laundry on Park Avenue, and, as I couldn't find him there, I advertised for him; but there is nothing mysterious about him or his disappearance, as far as I know."

"Well," said the clerk, "that about settles it. This Johnny who wrote the note evidently *thinks* that there is something mysterious, and has answered in kind; which proves that in the first place he doesn't know anything about it, and in the second place that he is a crook. So that lets him out."

"Oh, I don't know," I replied; "I believe I'll go."

"Well, if you're only looking to get your throat cut," the clerk laughed, "go right along; don't let me stop you. But as for little Rufus, the brass horses of Xerxes couldn't drag me down there. Still, I'll lend you a gun if you must go."

"No," I said, "I don't want a gun. But you can lend me a book if you want to."

"Better take one," the clerk protested. But as I shook my head, I saw him glance down, half unconsciously, at my gloved hands.

"That's it," I said; "I think I can take care of myself."

The clerk flushed uncomfortably. "I suppose you can," he said; "come on out, and I'll give you the book."

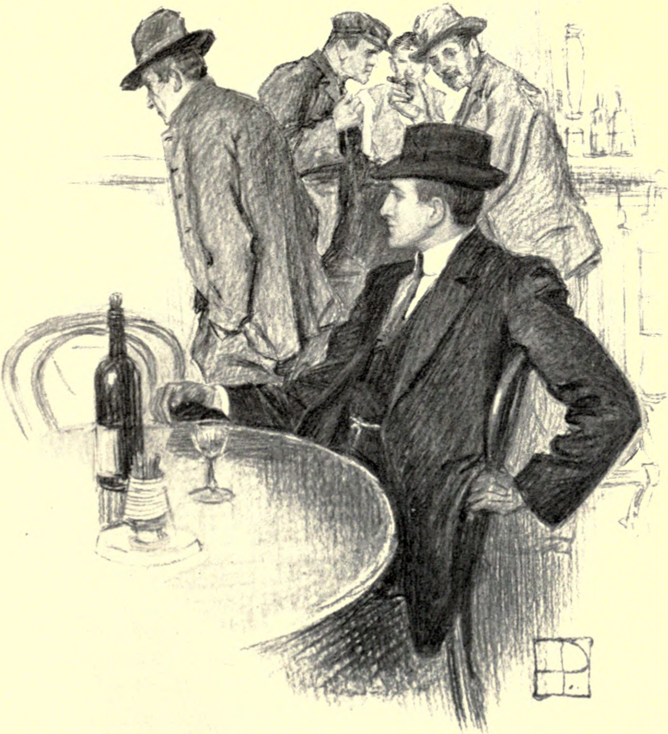
So it was with a copy of the *American Hotel Directory* under my arm that I started out for Seventh Avenue.

As I half expected, my rendezvous was a dirty one. Only three men were in the place as I came in, and I sank down gingerly into a sprung chair, by a little, grimy, wet-topped table. At the creak of my chair the bartender turned from rummaging a shelf behind the bar and brought his small, watery eyes to bear upon me. He was an unpleasant bartender, who evidently drank much of the liquor he dispensed, and whose great and bulbous nose was like some poisonous fire, which had broken out in the lurid smolder of the wrecked face.

"What's yours?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper that was evidently his natural voice.

I pondered. If it were true, as the clerk thought, that I was brought here on the chance that I might be worth the plucking, it behoved me to go warily. Even this dreary wreck with a drop or two of chloral could make the strength that I relied upon useless.

"I'll take a small bottle of claret, if you have it," I replied at length. Wine has the advantage



This was the Reverend Mr. Stevens

of coming sealed; whisky or beer in the open glass may be drugged behind the bar.

"Sure, we got it," whispered the bartender; and, indeed, to my surprise, I found the claret amazingly good.

Thus far, save for the bartender, no one had taken the slightest notice of either my entrance or my order. The three men at the bar stood leaning over their drinks with their backs toward me. Now, as I set down my glass, one of them turned and glanced at me hastily. He found my eyes upon him, and his glance only flickered over me for a second. Then again he turned his back upon me, with his head bent low and his shoulders hunched about his ears. I thought I heard a muttered word or so, then, still without turning his face toward me, he left the other two, and half slunk, half slouched out of the bar. Whether or not he had recognized me I could not tell, but I had known him on the instant. There could not be the least doubt about it. The washed-out, pimply face, the wavering blue eyes, and the long neck with its disproportionate, gulping Adam's apple had been too vividly impressed upon my memory ever in life to be forgotten. What he did here, I did not know; whether chance or design had brought him. But this was the Reverend Mr. Stevens, the man whom Ephraim Bond had employed to sanctify my marriage with Nancy.

XIV

MISFORTUNE

NATURALLY, my first impulse was to follow him. There were many things that I should have liked to ask him, many questions he might have answered, willingly or perhaps for money, or, failing that, to save his stringy neck. That he was in reality an ordained minister, with the right to perform the marriage ceremony, I had doubted from the very first. Nevertheless, there was always the bare possibility that he was some renegade of the cloth, fallen from what small grace he might once have possessed, yet still in his debasement retaining the power of his ordination, to misuse in any shady transaction to which fear or cupidity might lead him. And if he was a minister, the probability was that our marriage was legal, that Nancy was really mine, and the power of law my right and able ally. Above all things I should have liked to know whether I could claim her openly, as was my right, or must take her back, as she had been taken from me, by sheer force and by the right of love alone.

And yet I did not follow him. There was a chance — a bare chance — that he had not recognized me, and that his presence in this low dive was simply a fortuitous happening on his weak and shameful road. If I followed him and questioned him, he must of course recognize me, and, finding me in New York instead of Marbury, might guess Nancy's disappearance, or, at any rate, through my presence, have a secret worth the selling. It was better, I thought, to chance it, and if he had recognized me,— well, the harm was done; and Ephraim Bond or the man in the brown derby, or perhaps both of them, could take what profit they might from my presence in New York.

As I sat waiting for my anonymous correspondent, it seemed to me more and more probable that this meeting had not been a chance one; as time passed and my correspondent did not appear, the thought took on a certainty. But by whom, I wondered, had he been employed, if he had been employed at all. I had met him as the creature of Ephraim Bond, but if that tricky old gentleman had sent him here, then Bond himself must have been party to Nancy's disappearance, which was sheer confusion, for Stevens had not followed me into the bar, but had been there upon my arrival; which meant either that he was there by chance, or could only mean that my advertisement for Oscar Slater had fallen into the hands of the man in the brown derby, who, remembering the clues that he had left in mine, had thought of this possibility in my search, and, on the chance, had arranged this pretended meeting. The place and the incongruous mystery of it all lent color to the idea, for either my mere appearance had been all that my correspondent desired, or something had gone wrong with his plans, for, although I waited for an hour, no one spoke to me. Occasionally the doors would swing, and some bleary derelict from the world without would stumble into the bar, to lounge over a drink for a few minutes, and then stumble stupidly out again. From time to time the scarlet-faced bartender would refill their glasses with beer, but in all the full hour I waited, the men who had been Stevens' drinking companions scarcely shifted their positions, nor did either of them turn so that I could see his face. They were men, I noticed, of much the same pattern; young men, I thought, whose nondescript old clothes covered bodies that drink had not yet begun to weaken.

At the end of an hour I got up in disgust. I had had small hopes of learning anything really valuable, and yet I was disappointed and vaguely troubled; for not only had I learned absolutely nothing, but there was a very fair chance that I had been watched, or at least recognized, and that the people who had taken Nancy away from me would know before morning what methods I was taking to find her. I paused at the door to give one last glance about the grimy little place. I had pushed back my chair noisily, yet no one had taken the trouble to watch my leave-taking. The bartender was mopping spilled beer with a dirty rag. Some nondescript was leaning against the bar's farther end; and the two men who had been there since my coming still hunched together like two dreary scarecrows. I let the door swing behind me, and took a long thankful breath of the clean night air. Even Seventh Avenue seemed fresh and sweetly fragrant after the stale noisomeness that I had left behind; so that I walked along filling my lungs in grateful relief, with the thankful anticipation of the hot bath awaiting me.

What impulse it was that made me turn around I can not say. We all of us, I suppose, retain a few primal creature instincts. Man has been a hunter for too few centuries to forget the ages when he was hunted. As I turned, half the empty block back I saw two men swerve into the shadow of a doorway. At least it seemed to me that my turning had so made them swerve. And although I had got but a glimpse of them, and that a none too well-lighted half block away, yet I thought I recognized them as the comrades of the Reverend Mr. Stevens. If I was being followed I determined that the chase should not be an easy one. I turned briskly at the first corner in the direction of Sixth Avenue, and when I had gone a little way, stepped, myself, into a convenient shadow. As I half expected, my two men turned the corner after me, but evidently they were not to be fooled into passing me. The street, as far as they could see, was empty; but they knew that I could not have gone far, and they stood together on the corner like two drunken companions saying an interminable and garrulous good night. I suppose that I should have gone back to them; instead, I stole along as far as the shadow shielded me, and then, taking to my heels, ran at top speed for Sixth Avenue.

As I turned into Sixth Avenue I heard the crescendo roar of the up-town elevated train behind me. It was faint and still in the distance, but I made the best of my speed for the intervening block, and took the stairs three at a time. Even as I bought my ticket, the train hammered into the station. It was the work of a second, however, to drop the ticket in the box and ensconce myself in the train. All trains, I find, are perverse; but elevated trains are perversity personified. If you approach them in a leisurely manner, they slam their gates in your face; if you are in a hurry, they dawdle, gaping for a tardy arrival. As soon as I had taken my seat, I peered out upon the platform.

It seemed as if the train would never start. My two men came rushing up the stairs and, I think, omitted the formality of either purchasing or depositing tickets. They rushed to the gate of my car, but, I suppose, must have found it closed, for they turned and I lost sight of them running to the rear of the train. Whether they got on or not I could not at the moment be sure. But I was not to be left long in doubt, for, as my train skirted the park and drew into Fifty-ninth Street, a sodden face peered in at the rear door of the car for a moment, and wolfish eyes meeting mine, was withdrawn as suddenly as it came. I had at first intended going far up-town and doubling back by means of the subway; now, on a sudden impulse, as the brakes went on and we shuddered to a standstill, I got up quickly and made for the forward door, squeezing through the partly-opened gate, half running, half falling, down the long flight of stairs.

What I should have done, of course, was to turn in at the first decently lighted place I came to. It was through sheer stupidity that I did not; but it was not until the next day that I realized that already my address was known, that my very keeping of the rendezvous was an acknowledgment that I was "Mr. Tyler" of the Hotel Gloria. Now, in the excitement of flight and pursuit, I foolishly overlooked this obvious conclusion. I was anxious not to be followed home, and innocently supposed that I was making this a contest of speed and wits; so, like a silly hunted animal, I ran east through Fifty-ninth Street, dodging in and out of the groups of belated negroes, who make this block unpleasant at this hour, and cutting across Columbus Circle, hesitated for a moment at the subway entrance, then plunged fatuously into Central Park. The park seemed to me at the moment the ideal labyrinth in which to lose my pursuers. Its lights were few and scattered, and at frequent intervals winding path cut winding path, and clumps of new-leaved shrubbery made unexpected shadowy hiding-places. It was this very intricate quality of the park's arrangement that made my choice of it a mistake. For after doubling two or three times, I stopped to listen and made sure that I had shaken off and distanced my pursuers.

A ghostly policeman passed me, and I nodded to him gaily, for I was childishly pleased with myself; so pleased that I found myself whistling softly as I turned vaguely east in what I supposed to be the direction of Fifth Avenue. I must have been walking four or five minutes before my men stepped suddenly out in front of me.

For a second all three of us stood still, peering in the vague light for further certainty; then, as if at some preconcerted signal, they sprang at me. Instinctively I dodged a little to one side, as something long and heavy grazed my right ear and thudded in crushing silence on to my shoulder. The other man had dived and taken me about the knees.

"I got him, Jim," he grunted. "Soak him."

In the meantime, I had struck the man with the sand-bag full in the chin with my left hand, and, as he staggered, I caught him roughly by the coat, and still with my left hand, for my right arm seemed numb and powerless, I jerked him forward so that he toppled toward me, and the three of us went down in a heap. I think, even as we fell, I felt the exultant joy of fighting. Then I squirmed and kicked out viciously, for the man who still held my knees had suddenly fastened his teeth in my useless wrist. With the animal pain of it, and the flashing recognition of the unfairness and murderous intent of the fight, my unused, unrecognized strength swept over me like a hot wave. I found myself suddenly on my feet, holding my lesser assailant by the collar and using his head as a sort of unwieldy club to batter consciousness out of the man upon the sidewalk. My jerking him viciously back for a third blow was the last thing I remember, for, like a suddenly extinguished light, the world went utterly out of existence. It must have been some time before it came reelingly before my eyes again.

"Lave go my arrm; lave it go, ye divil. Do ye want to break it?"

I relaxed an unconscious grasp and closed my eyes for a sickening moment.

"Who are you?" I whispered at length.

"Who ye are has got more to do with it," the voice answered.

I tried opening my eyes again, and in the staggering darkness saw the looming outline of a policeman's helmet.

"Where are they, officer?" I asked.

The policeman dragged me up into a sitting posture.

"There," he said. "I've been holding your head in my lap for the last five minutes, and 'tis a silly looking sight the two of us was. Are ye able to sit? What hit ye? Were ye attackted?"

"I was," I answered. "Didn't you see them?"

"Not a sowl. But I near broke me neck over ye. It's a fearsome thing to step on a man's stomach in the dark and get never a grunt out of him. Do ye want to make a complaint?"

"No," I said vaguely, "I believe I'll go home. I'm not feeling very well." I laughed abruptly, and stopped at the foolish sound of it.

The park policeman lent me a steadying arm and took me as far as the gate, protesting kindly that he had better find a cab.

"No wonder ye feel sick," he said, "with a boomp on the back of yer head like the dome of a synagogue. Ye'd better run up to the hospital and see if any of yer skull is left, for if ye've been murdered, ye ought to make a complaint whether ye want to or not."

"No," I protested, "I'm all right," and at the Fifth Avenue entrance I left him.

I had only gone about a block, however, before a terrible thought burnt for a moment the sick dizziness from my mind. I stopped under a light and began a systematic search of my pockets. They were empty. The collar and tie of the man in the brown derby, my watch, my note-book, and my money were all of them gone. I had been stripped absolutely bare.

XV

THE OLD GENTLEMAN OF THE CAFE

IN a sort of daze I found my way, as best I could, to the Hotel Gloria. After the first brilliant shock of realization, the fog of confusion had settled down again, with this additional whirling eddy of a new misfortune. I stumbled up the steps and to the desk in the main office. My friend, the clerk, glanced up at me inquiringly, and whistled softly in sheer amazement.

"Well," he said, "well! You *did* get it, didn't you? What on earth happened?"

"I was sand-bagged, I think," I answered. "I'll tell you all about it in the morning. I'm too dizzy to get it straight now."

This particular clerk of the Hotel Gloria had known me, as I have said, for several years, and I liked him because he was one of the few people on earth to whom my misfortune had never seemed to make any particular difference. I should hardly have called him a friend; nevertheless, there had always been in his brisk professional cordiality a strain of something more intimately human. In his present concern he forgot his professional rôle altogether, and came from behind the office enclosure with an actual anxiety that struck my notice and pleased me in spite of my mental chaos. Very gently he took off my crushed hat and gave attention to my injury.

"Lord, man," he said; "you ought to have a doctor."

I shook my head stupidly. "No, I oughtn't," I said. "I couldn't possibly pay one. They took every cent I had. I don't even know how I'll pay my bill here."

"Well, don't bother about that now," the clerk said. "The thing for you to do is to get to bed," and he sent in a call for the hotel physician.

Between them they made me comparatively comfortable. The doctor gave me a sedative and told me to go to sleep; but it was some hours before I was able to do so. The pulsing torment in my brain racked me; the situation I must face on the morrow filled me with a feverish apprehension. But in spite of it, and in spite of the pain, once asleep, I slept well; and awoke about ten o'clock to find myself much better.

"Quite marvelous, my dear sir," the doctor said; "quite marvelous. But your physique is something very unusual, and I should say that you had led a pretty decent life. It all counts. It all counts."

But, although the pain had mostly disappeared, I was still very much troubled. I was here, I realized, without a friend in the city, with a hotel bill as yet unpaid, and not a cent in the world that I could immediately lay my hands on. The fight before me called to me imperatively, and my enemies had stripped me of the very sinews of war.

When I had finished my breakfast, the hotel clerk came and sat down beside my bed.

"Well," he said, "you're looking pretty fit."

"Fit enough," I admitted gloomily, "and, for that matter, I am going to get up in a few minutes, doctor or no doctor. But what I'm going to do next is more than I can tell you. Is it quite clear to you that I can't even pay my hotel bill, and that I haven't enough baggage to be worth seizing?"

The clerk laughed. "I shouldn't worry about that if I were you," he said. "See here, Mr. Ellsworth, we know you pretty well by this time. We'll let the bill go for a while, and you can stay here until you can get in touch with friends. In the meantime I guess we can supply you with what money you need."

I have heard many people complain that New York is a cold and soulless place, where tradesman and Boniface have learned by such long and bitter experience the guile of a scheming world, that no need, however just, can turn them from their policy of suspicion. Yet here was a young man, an employée — to be sure a trusted one — who was offering me, quite as a matter of course, a trust and assistance for which he himself must pay, if by any chance he should have overestimated my honesty or ultimate solvency.

"I'm sure I thank you very much," I said, rather weakly, for in my shaken condition I found it hard to hide the sudden flood of gratitude which he would have found embarrassing. Still, try as I would, my voice was a little unsteady, and, like any normal American, he became immediately ill at ease.

"Oh, that's all right," he said bruskly, and retreated in confusion.

My emotions as I dressed were strangely mixed. Within a short week my numb, uneventful life had been turned topsy-turvy, and its gray fabric had suddenly been strewn with a bewildering tangle of black and gold; hope and love, loss and fear played havoc with its dreary serenity; and three times within the last few days chance acquaintances had spoken to me in kindness. I had never had very much money, now at a stroke I was absolutely penniless. It seemed to my still aching senses as if I must be moving in a dream from which I might at any moment awake. Yet I stepped out into the city with no very definite plan and with a few borrowed dollars in my pocket, glowing in spite of myself, and in spite of my new misfortune, with the unconquered kindliness of the world. Before I left the hotel I wrote a short note to my brother, telling him simply that I had been waylaid and robbed, and asking him to loan me a hundred dollars until I could find some way of repairing my fortunes. This was, I recognized, only an arrow shot into the air, for my brother was an uncertain person, rarely in funds, or in the same place for any length of time; but at the moment it was the only way of getting money that I could think of, and without money my blind search for Nancy would be crippled also.

I walked for a few blocks in the fresh air, trying as best I could to make some definite plan of campaign. Slater, the retired laundryman, might still be found, but by what means I could not at the moment devise, unless, perhaps, I were to make an appeal to the police. Every lost day was an added terror to me, and to think at all I had to put from my mind the thought of Nancy's possible circumstances, of the many ugly chances that might befall her. Even if she had been taken back to her uncle's, the shock of returning to the place she had feared and hated for so long might work her incalculable harm.

Her uncle's! I paused abruptly in the middle of the block. Why had I not gone there at the very outset? For if she were there I made sure they could not hide her from me; and if she were not, and this thing had been done without the knowledge of Ephraim Bond, then, for all I knew, he might prove an eager ally.

I turned, and making my way back to Fifth Avenue, took a bus up-town, determining on my way that the moment the door was opened I would slip past the servant and enter the house. With any sort of luck the door should be opened by Jonas, and Jonas, as it seemed to me, was really devoted to Nancy; so that I might question him exhaustively before he even announced me to Mr. Bond. Just what method I would take with Mr. Bond himself I left to circumstance and our meeting. But I made up my mind that he should give me information if he had any, and, in any case, what immediate assistance I needed. I got down from my bus very truculently and with my heart beating wildly at the possibility that my search might need go no further, that perhaps I was to find Nancy again in the place that I first found her. I had rung the bell for the third time in my impatience before I came down to earth. They had seen me, I thought, and would not answer. Then, with a weary certainty, I went down the steps and looked up over the house. The sign of an Electric Protective Company hung in front of the drawn shade of the lower window, as indication to all the world — and more particularly the underworld — that the house was closed and empty and — wired against intrusion.

That I might leave no stone unturned, rather than through any hope of success, I looked up the Lexington Avenue stable, only to find it locked as I had expected. It was like beating against a stone wall. And like a man suddenly thrown into a dungeon and finding suddenly that there is no way of escape, for a little while, I think, I went mad. Nancy was somewhere, probably not far away, and for all my strength and for all my love, I could not find her. The fact dinned itself through my consciousness as I blindly paced the crowded city streets and walked unremembered miles. I brought up again, at last, before the Lexington Avenue stable. Like some one lost in the woods, I had probably walked in a great irregular circle. Now it was late afternoon, and I was utterly tired. I looked about wearily for a place where I might rest and, if possible, bring myself to some condition of reason.

Across the street from the stable, and sandwiched in between a stranded dwelling and a tobacco shop, was a little lunch-room dignified by the name of the "Golden Café." The place as I entered it was almost empty, and I took a table in a corner by myself. The red-haired, indifferent boy in charge brought me black coffee. Two women were chatting over tea by the window, and I lingered impatiently over my coffee, waiting for them to leave; for I wanted to have the proprietor to myself. They were an unconscionable time, and I made sure that other patrons would drop in; but no one else came, and at last the women departed, leaving a tip just large enough to put the red-haired boy into a bad humor.

"Do you know," I asked him, "who owns that red-brick stable across the way?"

"What did you say you wanted?" he replied, passing me and speaking across the counter behind me.

"I wanted to know," I repeated, "who owns that stable directly opposite?"

"Dunno," said the boy.

He spoke as if he had paid no attention to my question, so that I turned around for my next and launched it squarely at him. "Well, have you ever heard of Ephraim Bond?" I asked.

"Nope; want any more coffee?"

"I suppose so," I said, and turned back to my table.

The boy came out from behind his counter, and shuffled past me; and I looked up to see that another customer had entered. He was a small white-haired man, whose pleasant face, with its widely-set, attractive-looking eyes, seemed perfectly familiar. When he had given his order he looked down the room at me, and I bowed, for I was certain that I had met him somewhere. Indeed, he might have been some old friend of my father's, aged now beyond instant recognition, but still a certain memory. He returned my bow nervously, and bent over his food; but once or twice, as I sipped my second cup of coffee, I found his mild eyes studying me. I had forgotten about him, however, and the idle wonder of who he was, when he abruptly slid into the chair opposite me.

"Did I hear you ask, sir," he said in a queer, quiet little voice, "for a man named Ephraim Bond?"

XVI

WE HOLD CONFERENCE

FOR a moment I was too surprised to answer him, but the mild blue eyes never wavered from mine. The lined, old face presented such a gentle courtesy that I nodded without further thought.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "Do you know him, and can you tell me if he is the owner of that stable opposite?"

The old gentleman smiled. "I'll have to make you a Yankee answer, I'm afraid," he said. "Are you a friend of Ephraim Bond's, and what do you want of him?"

I hesitated. I did not want to answer questions, and, even if I answered this, I hardly knew what reply to make to the first half of his question. "I don't suppose I'm exactly a friend," I said at length, "but I'm very anxious to find him. I have been to his house and found it closed, and I had an idea that he owned that stable over there."

"He doesn't," said the old gentleman. And the reply seemed by its very abruptness to end the conversation. Nevertheless, I sat still and waited.

The old gentleman had dropped his eyes, and seemed to be centering all his attention on a little noteless tune he was drumming with long, blunt fingers on the marble table-top. Whenever he finished a particularly difficult run he would glance up at me, for all the world like a shy little boy, and then fall again to his drumming. At last he folded his hands in front of him, and leaned across the table over them.

"Has he hurt you in any way?" he asked.

I stared at him in amazement. "Why do you ask that?" I said. "Do you know who I am?"

"I am not sure," said the old gentleman; "I was only wondering."

"I'm not sure that he has hurt me, either," I replied; "but I should very much like to find him. Do you know where he is at present?"

The old gentleman rapped sharply with a coin on the table-top. "Our checks, boy, our checks," he said. He motioned away the money I took from my pocket. "No, no," he said, "let me settle; it will save time. You and I need to have a long talk together, and this is no place for it. Will you do me the courtesy of visiting my room?"

"Gladly," I answered, and reached for my hat.

At the first corner I started unconsciously to turn west, and my companion laid his hand on my arm.

"No," he said, "east, if you please. East, in fact some distance east. I — perhaps I should explain that I am a sociologist, a student, you understand, of mankind and society. There is nothing more interesting than man's relations with man, nothing more interesting and nothing more complex. It is pleasant, I assure you, to be in close touch with humanity; to rub elbows with one's fellow beings; to be close to the heart of hurly-burly human existence. I have no patience, sir, with your hermit, your solitary, your recluse. God knows, we're most of us enough alone in a crowd, without disturbing our mental balance further by withdrawal from it. Men, women and children, trouble, joy and sorrow, human defeat and ultimate human victory, these are the only things worth watching in the world, the only things of importance to a thinking man. Your recluse is only a sort of coward who dares not put his soul to the acid test of life. He would save his soul and loses it; he draws away from others to find the full development of his ego, and he ends by turning his ego into a vague, shadowy thing, as soft and cloudy-outlined as a sponge. Think what he misses; think what he misses. Love is lost to him, and even hate becomes a flabby thing. Man is an emotional animal, contrived and equipped for the great adventure of life, and if he refuses to enter the lists he loses its very essence and meaning. Where I live, sir, the world moves. Personally I do not think that the 'annals of the poor' are either short or simple. With us neither the duello nor marriage by conquest are things of the past. Men give or strike because their hearts are touched, and so men have through all the ages. The city, sir, is the very cream of human existence. Here life cries out to you on every corner. That is what appeals to me, sir; here even an old man may throw his cap into the ring."

We had been walking rapidly, and, as we walked, the old gentleman beside me had straightened up, and was pouring forth his torrential eulogy of his chosen fad with a quite unexpected fire and rapidity; and, as he spoke, my wonder grew until for a moment I almost doubted his sanity. But although his blue eyes had lost their mildness and now sparkled with a strange youthful vivacity, yet they were steady and their look contained; so that the old gentleman, I concluded, was merely an eccentric enthusiast, joyously astride his rearing hobby. At Second Avenue we had turned down-town, and now, as my companion concluded, he stopped me with a large gesture before the dark door of a rather dilapidated tenement.

"Here," he said, "is the palace of the pauper, the parliament house of mankind's majority."

He dived into the dark doorway like an aged, but nimble, white rabbit.

"Better keep your hand on the wall," he said, as I stumbled on the first step. "Some of us have been rather short of firewood of late, and we have been forced to sacrifice the balustrade."

I did as I was bid, willingly enough, although, even through my gloves, the wall felt dirty, cold and greasy; so that at the first touch I shuddered with repulsion. For the stairs were in almost total darkness, save here and there, where some door, left open on a small and tumbled apartment, gave some of its meager and needed light escape.

"You will notice," the old gentleman called back to me over his shoulder, "that the higher we go, the more balustrade we have. What heat there is rises, I suppose, or it may be chance, it may be just chance. We're making a long climb, you see. As yet I live on the top floor, as I have a taste for seeing the sky. I probably could never grow accustomed to living without sight of it. This next to the last step is broken; you'd better skip it."

He paused before his door a little out of breath, fumbling in the darkness for the lock. When it had clicked back, he still held the knob for a moment.

"Perhaps I should say," he said, "that I have allowed myself to live a little better than my neighbors. A man, I take it, has a right to what he can get in life," and with that he swung the door open.

The room before me was the most amazing one I have ever seen. The sun flooded into it brilliantly, for its two small, white-curtained windows faced the south, and overhead the larger part of the ceiling had been replaced by a giant skylight, with a rolling shade, like that of a studio. A single Bokhara rug covered the floor. The walls were lined with shelves almost to the ceiling, where books disputed space with a bewildering miscellany; Oriental curios and European *objets d'art* jostled one another incongruously, and, here or there, some cheap German or Yankee gimcrack rested with all the impertinence of smart and interesting modernity. In one corner a large phonograph stood with a great heap of disks beside it, while its other side propped a big banjo, fretted and inlaid like a colored minstrel's. As we came blinking into the room, three birds fluttered up from the littered center-table.

"Don't keep them in cages," the old gentleman explained, chirping to them as they settled on his shoulders. "I've never been able to persuade myself that a bird really liked a cage. This one," and he stretched out a hand on which was perched a big, long-billed, wicked-looking bird with iridescent, black plumage and yellow legs and wattles, "is a Mino bird. It comes from Java, you know. It talks sometimes when it feels like it."

The bird eyed me wickedly with its head on one side. "Welcome," he croaked once, morosely.

"The other two are canaries," said the old gentleman. "It is really surprising and delightful to hear their varied accompaniments when the phonograph is running. Would you like to hear a tune?"

"If you will forgive me," I said, "I am very anxious to get at the business in hand. You see, I have a very particular reason for finding Mr. Bond, so that I fear you would find me a poor listener. Do you really know something about him?"

The old gentleman looked a little disappointed. "Well, well," he said, "I suppose we'd better get to business first, but I have some delightful new records that I am sure would interest you. Still, you are right; we had better have our talk. Now just what was it that you wished to see Mr. Bond about?"

"I don't quite know how to answer you," I replied. "My business with Mr. Bond is of a very private and personal nature. If you know where he is, couldn't you simply send me to him without knowing what I wanted?"

The old gentleman rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "See here," he said, after a reflective moment, "you'd better start right in at the beginning and tell me what is the matter. I know, in the first place, that you're not looking for Ephraim Bond just for the pleasure of seeing him, for to me you appear perfectly sane. He has done something to you or you want something from him; one or the other, perhaps both," and he paused, eying me shrewdly to see how well his shot had told.

"Come, come," he said, as I still hesitated, "surely you can not be afraid to confide in me. I give you my word that I will hold everything you say as sacred, and, unless I am very much mistaken, I can help you in some small measure. I know Ephraim Bond and have known him for some years, but he is no friend of mine. In fact, I don't care for him at all. Better speak up. Has he cheated you or does he owe you money?"

Circumstance had never given me a confidant in life. Since my mother's death I had always had to thresh out every problem by myself, and as best I could, unaided. Now in my extremity, with Nancy gone, with no friends, and with, as I knew, a definite effort being made against my search and the search now a seemingly blind one, this chance acquaintance, this mild-mannered, gentle old enthusiast appealed to a sense other than my reason, yet wistfully strong enough to overshadow a cautious mistrust.

"Have you ever seen Ephraim Bond's niece?" I asked.

"There," said the old gentleman, "there, just excuse me for a moment, will you?"

He jumped up from his chair and disappeared through a door near the end of the room.

"Just as I thought," he said, coming back a moment later; "that Mino bird is washing in my water pitcher. I keep it covered generally, for he'll be sure to drown himself. It would be much better, I suppose, if I kept my water in a pail. But, try as I will, I can't keep that bird out of it. They live in swamps, you know. Now what was it you asked me?"

His expression was so frankly open, his voice so kindly and his manner so free from any thought of offense, that, startled and upset as I was, I could not find it in my heart to do other than repeat my question.

"His niece," said the old gentleman, "to be sure, he did have a niece. What about her?"

I had almost made up my mind to tell him the whole story, but his interruptions and his sudden questions were so disconcerting that now I paused, not knowing exactly where to commence.

"Come, come," said the old gentleman, "speak out, my dear sir, speak out. But perhaps you think I'm not treating you fairly. Of course I knew his niece, knew her quite well at one time, although I have not seen her for some years. Nancy, her name was; a very pretty girl to my thinking."

He had hitched his chair up to the table, and had recommenced the virtuoso drumming that our departure from the café had interrupted.

"Well," I said at last, "I am very anxious to find Miss Bond. She is the only reason I want to find her uncle."

"Do you know," said the old gentleman, "that I have utterly forgotten to ask you your name? My name is Ogilby, Martin Ogilby."

"Mine is Mason Ellsworth," I said.

"Then may I ask," said the old gentleman pompously, "just what interest you have, Mr. Ellsworth, in Miss Nancy Bond?"

"Mr. Ogilby," I answered, "I may be doing a very foolish thing, but I am in great distress and you have been kind to me. I am going to tell you the whole story from beginning to end."

The old gentleman smiled and nodded. "That," he said, "is a very sensible thing to do."

Nor, after that, did he interrupt me once in the telling, but sat very still, with long, blunt fingers pressed together in churchsteeple fashion on the table before him. When I had done he sighed deeply.

"That is very like every one of them," he said. "Men, after all, can be counted on to be consistent."

"Do you mean to say," I asked, "that you know who the man in the brown derby is?"

The old gentleman fidgeted.

"I believe you said he gave his name as 'Doctor Morrison'?"

"Well, yes; but I hardly supposed that to be his real name."

"Well," the old gentleman sighed, "I think we will have to let it do for the present. Doctor Morrison is as good a name as any other; better, much better, than some."

"But," I protested, "if I can find out who this man really is, it will clear up the whole matter. No one can hide it for very long, once you know his name."

"Don't you think so?" asked the old gentleman; "don't you think so? I should not think it so very difficult a thing for a man to hide somewhere in this big country, or this big city, no matter who knew his name. In fact, it's done all the time. I should say that the principal thing you needed now was money. I'm a sociologist if you will, Mr. Ellsworth, but I don't think that I'm a socialist, not a very radical one at any rate. Money is a good defense and a good weapon; in fact, I have a great respect for it."

"That's all very well," I said, "but where am I going to get it?"

"That's so," the old gentleman sighed, "where are you going to get it? For that matter, Mr. Ellsworth, don't you think this is a pretty hopeless search? Even if you could find Miss Bond — or shall we call her Mrs. Ellsworth — would she care to return with you, or, even should she return, would it be greatly to your advantage? Could she have disappeared, do you think, without some connivance, or at least a certain acquiescence, of her own? What makes you believe that she did not leave of her own accord, that she did not really write the note you say you found, that even should you find her, she would be willing to return?"

"Because, Mr. Ogilby," I said, "because I love her more than anything else in the world, and because she has told me that she loves me."

"Do you think that that is a good reason?" he asked.

"Don't you?"

The old gentleman got up from his chair and leaned over me, putting both hands on my shoulders.

"I think, Mr. Ellsworth," he said, "that it's the very finest reason in the world, and I think, too, that you're a man after my own heart."

He straightened up and paced the room with nervous strides, sinking finally into his chair again. Both of us sat in silence. The Mino bird, still wet, came in from the next room and hopped up to shake his draggled plumage on the table. One of the canaries trilled into a soft little undertone of song.

"Yes," said the old gentleman at last, "a man after my own heart," and blew his nose violently.

I could make no answer. His sympathy was grateful to me, but, after all, I had only told my story to an old eccentric, who lived at the top of a tenement house and played at studying the world. That he seemed to know the Bonds was of little advantage to me, unless he could — or would — show me the identity of the man in the brown derby.

"Well, well," said the old gentleman, "here I've been letting you sit and worry. You must forgive me. You must hear this new Caruso record. I find the phonograph very soothing."

I smiled weakly in my disappointment and made as if to get to my feet, but he waved me back.

"I won't be a moment," he said.

The record once going, he went into his bedroom again, leaving me alone to my disappointment and the delights of the phonograph. I sat with my face buried in my gloved hands trying to puzzle some sense into my world. The wonderful tenor voice of the singer rose and fell, thrilling with the ecstasy of love triumphant, and as the last note died away there came a soft step behind me and the old gentleman's hand was laid again upon my shoulder.

"Fine, is it not?" he whispered. "I could not bear to interrupt it. But, my friend, you have work before you. We have work before us both, and we'd better be setting about it." As he spoke he laid before me on the table a roll of yellow money. "That's what you need most, just at present," he said.

XVII

THE SINEWS OF WAR

MECHANICALLY I picked up the money and counted it over. There were ten bills of one hundred dollars each, ten fifty-dollar bills and five hundred dollars in fives, tens and twenties. Two thousand dollars had dropped from the skies, as it were, into my lap.

"But — but," I said, "I can not take all this money. It is a large sum, greater than I shall need or can repay."

Mr. Ogilby shook his head vigorously. "That is a very absurd remark," he said. "In the first place it is hardly a large sum, and in the second place you can not possibly tell how much you will need. As far as repaying goes, we can talk about that when the time comes. I am asking you to give me no note or receipt, so you see that, if you wish, you can repudiate your debt altogether." I flushed, I suppose, for he added quickly, "Oh, I know that you will not, nor did I mean to imply any such thing. I simply want you to feel that the money is yours to use or do with as you like, and that (although you understand this is in confidence) there is plenty more where it came from. I have told you, Mr. Ellsworth, that I am a student of human nature, but I am, or want to be, a little more than that. Philosophy, when all is said and done, is a pretty cold wand to touch the world with. It is all very well to stand aside and theorize; but I, for one, can not resist on occasion plunging my hand into life's pasty. This money is not a gift but an investment, and I am imposing one condition on you in offering it."

"Condition?" I asked.

"Yes," said Mr. Ogilby, his mild blue eyes fixed seriously upon me, "a condition. I want you to keep in touch with me, to let me know how your search prospers. I want to be — what is it the boys call it nowadays? —'in on the game.'"

He brought out the phrase of modern slang in serious triumph. Just how far the man was an eccentric I could not tell. We are very apt to brand as eccentricity any conduct or point of view which strays radically from that to which we are accustomed. That this old man should wish to spice his life with other people's joys and sorrows, that he should even wish to make its struggle a vicarious purchase, set him apart, to be sure, from the men and women of my acquaintance, but, on reflection, gave me no ground whatsoever for believing him irresponsible or insane.

"Your condition is a very easy one," I said, "and I am going to accept it and the money too, Mr. Ogilby. I am taking it, you understand, as a loan; but I have told you my circumstances, so that you understand how distant the prospect is of my being able to repay it, should I be forced to spend the entire sum."

Mr. Ogilby laughed. "Don't you think, Mr. Ellsworth," he said, "that with your wife, your love and your future happiness at stake, you are carrying scruple a little too far in wondering whether I am mentally competent?"

He had stopped his pacing of the room as he said this, and stood looking down at me, a little twinkle in the mild, blue eyes. Both judgment and diagnosis were so correct and so unexpected that I found myself unable to answer.

"Come, sir," said Mr. Ogilby, "you understand what I mean, and that what I say I mean in good part. It is the privilege of age, my boy, to speak its mind out. Advice and money are about all that it has to give."

He straightened his shoulders, and pushed the white hair back from his forehead.

"It is a bugle call, sir, a bugle call. I doubt, sir, if I shall ever be so old that I am deaf to that echo of youth. Whatever happened, at your age, the great wall of China should not stop me; and if I needed money to find my love, and could get it in no other way, I should take the first money that came to hand, with or without the consent of its owner. You have spirit enough, I'll warrant, but you have not lived long enough to see the relative value of things. Leave your moralizing to us old men; we have little else to do. What difference does it make, whether or not you'll be able to repay my money? The vital thing is that you have it."

"I know that your philosophy is wrong," I laughed, "and I suspect that you are preaching very bad morals, but you are right in your reproof."

"Well," said the old gentleman, "what are you going to do next, now that you have the sinews of war?"

"You're quite sure," I said, "that you can't tell me who the man in the brown derby is. I can not help feeling that you know; and if you do know, for the life of me I can't see why you shouldn't tell."

For a few minutes Mr. Ogilby resumed his drumming on the table, and I could see that he was debating the matter. At last he looked up at me uneasily.

"Don't you think," he said, almost defensively, "that I have done something for you already? I'll admit that I'm pretty sure who this Doctor Morrison is, and perhaps some day I may tell you; but not to-day. Really, I don't feel that I could tell you to-day. You'll have to take my word for it that I would like to. Besides, it shouldn't be such very hard work for you to find out for yourself, and that would be better — very much better, very much better indeed. In fact, Mr. Ellsworth, I not only do not care whether you repay my money or not, but I should be obliged to you if you could manage to forget where it came from, or in any event, to make it a sort of honorable secret between us two. This 'Doctor Morrison,' if he is the man I think he is, has his good points, some very good points indeed. He did something once that was not only clever but very pleasing. In fact, he righted a great wrong, so that, but for your own peculiar circumstances, I would not for the world do anything that in any way militated against him. He's clever, dreadfully clever. I should dislike extremely making an enemy of him, so that I must beg you to be very careful."

He grew more and more nervous as he spoke, and there was an intensity in his final appeal that startled me. The youthful valor of a few minutes ago had left his face, so that he seemed only a nervous, old man, afraid, sorry, and ashamed, whose fear overmastered either shame or sorrow; so that without knowing why, my heart went out to him in sympathy.

"All right, Mr. Ogilby," I said; "you may depend upon it that when I find Doctor Morrison I shall mention neither you nor this money."

"No one must know about it, no one," he said.

"Do you suppose," I asked, "that if I could find him, Ephraim Bond could or would help me?"

The old gentleman's hand went to trembling lips.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but I do not think so. If you take my advice, you'll keep away from him." He got up and putting his hand on my shoulder, leaned close to my ear, "I have sometimes thought," he whispered, "that that man was the devil incarnate."

I stared at him with my first doubts as to his sanity strongly reawakened.

"Now," Mr. Ogilby said more quietly, "what has been your own experience of him? Should you say he was a man to be trusted or a man to be treated carelessly? You may have found some measure of happiness through him, but do you think he did what he did for either your happiness or that of his niece?"

"No," I said, "you are quite right; he is the devil."

Mr. Ogilby's hand clutched my sleeve. "Youth and strength," he said, "should be afraid of nothing, even the devil. I'm glad that I have found you, Mr. Ellsworth, very glad indeed. Between us, perhaps, we can put the devil in chains. I think you are almost stronger than even Doctor Morrison."

"I wish that were all that counted," I answered; "physical strength isn't of much use nowadays.

Modern machinery and modern laws have put sheer muscle out of the running."

Delight was coming back again into the old face.

"Do not be too sure of that," said Mr. Ogilby; "do not be too sure. Machinery and laws, after all, are superficial. As I have told you, adventure lies just under the surface of life. You may turn any corner to find all civilization swept away for you, to find yourself suddenly in the midst of such a situation that modernity will drop from you like a garment, law and custom be stripped away, and yourself, the naked man, with only man's primal and eternal weapons to help you; your heart, your brain, your bodily strength. Even a king may find a sudden dagger at his heart, may have to think and act quickly, may have to struggle and sweat, man to man, with an assassin, and, by the strength which you make too little of, decide the very pages of history itself."

There was a wildfire of enthusiasm about this little old gentleman, which burned away doubt and discouragement like a flame. I found myself forgetting that I was very tired, that I was baffled and once defeated; like the great royal poet, I felt my strength renewed and the joy of battle stirring in my heart.

"I wish I could take you with me, Mr. Ogilby," I said; "I find you a healthy stimulant."

Mr. Ogilby sighed, "I wish so too, but that is impossible. I can not do much but look down from my window at life and occasionally shout encouragement. May I ask what it is that you propose to do first?"

"Well," I replied, "first I shall go back to my hotel to see if, by any chance, there is a letter from Nancy, and then perhaps the best thing to do would be to go to some good private detective bureau. I do not know why that did not occur to me in the first place, but detective, in some way, meant to me police, and police generally mean publicity. I have been very anxious, if possible, to keep this matter private."

"Quite right," said Mr. Ogilby.

"But naturally a private detective is an entirely different thing, and now with my pocket full of money I can afford one."

"Well," said Mr. Ogilby, "you must let me hear from you every day. No, do not make a note of my address. It will be easy enough for you to remember it, and things committed to paper so often come into other hands."

"I know that well enough," I said ruefully.

"Exactly, exactly. It would even be better, Mr. Ellsworth, if you left the envelope blank, and only addressed it the moment before slipping your letter into the box."

He opened the door and escorted me himself to the head of the stairs. When I reached the darkness of the next landing, I looked back to see him still standing there peering after me.

"Good-by," I said, "and thanks."

"Good-by and God be with you," said Mr. Ogilby.

I clattered heedlessly down the nauseous, dangerous stairs, keeping well to the wall, to be sure, but quite unmindful of their treacherous gloom; for now I had a definite plan and all the money I was likely to need, and the brave words of the little, old gentleman on the top floor were still echoing like a bugle in my ears. I set my face west, and half running, half walking, found my way back to my hotel.

"Good luck?" asked my friend, the hotel clerk.

"Yes," I said, drawing out my money. "I want to pay my bill and have you put half of this in the safe. Put it in an envelope under your own name, so that, if need be, you can telegraph it to me."

"Going away?" he asked, as unstartled as if my sudden wealth were the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm not sure," I said, "and for the present I am going to keep my room. Has any mail come for me?"

The clerk shook his head. I hardly expected any, and turned away to search the red telephone book for a list of detective agencies. I found several, and, with the old gentleman's advice still in my mind, committed to memory the addresses of four or five which struck my fancy. I thought I would make the rounds until I found some man I personally liked, who seemed honest, intelligent and experienced enough to work with me and for me. But before going out again, I stopped at the desk and repeated the names which I had chosen to the clerk.

"Do you know anything about any of these people?" I asked him.

"I guess they're all of them straight enough," said the clerk. "Still after the mysterious Slater, or are you out for revenge?"

"A little of both," I answered, "or even a little of either."

"Well," said the clerk, "that's the way to do it, providing of course that you get a good Sherlock. These sleuths are like everybody else, some of them straight, some of them crooked. Don't be afraid to cross-examine them. By the way, the mail's just come in. Shall I run over it for you, or are you in too much of a hurry?"

"No," I said, "I'll wait, but there isn't much chance that you'll find anything."

In spite of my doubt, I found myself waiting very impatiently.

"Here you are," the clerk said; "is this any use to you?" and he tossed a letter onto the counter.

The envelope was an ordinary one, thumb-marked and dirty, and with a bloated distortion, as if it had once been wet. It had been addressed to me at Marbury, and readdressed from there in a scrawl of purple ink. As carefully as my excitement would permit, I tore it open and pulled out the little half-sheet it contained.

"Steady on," said the clerk; "what is the matter?"

"It's all right," I replied; "it's all right." For down at the bottom of the sheet, squeezed into the last bit of cramped space, was a name I looked for, set before another which brought the tears stinging into my eyes with the surprise and joy of it, with an unbounded thanksgiving for their mystic and magical coupling; for I read simply, "Nancy Ellsworth."

XVIII

I HEAR NEWS

I SLIPPED the note back into its envelope and into the side pocket of my coat, where I kept my hand upon it as if it were some sentient, precious thing that might escape me unaware. I was wild to read it, but impatient, too, to be alone with this my first signed letter from Nancy, to be out of public observation, away, even, from the friendly eyes of the clerk. I did not wait for the elevator but ran up the three flights of stairs, and locked and bolted the door of my room behind me. Even there I searched the place, peering into closets and beneath the bed, as some timorous old maid might have done, to make the certainty of my privacy doubly sure. Then again I drew the letter out. It was written very minutely and in pencil, so that I had to hold it to the light:

"MASON, DEAR:

"In the first place I am well; but hurry, for I am afraid. As I wrote you at Mrs. Lathrop's — and surely that good woman has somehow got you my note — they took me, pretending I was insane. They still outwardly keep that pretense up, and in private he is cruel enough to boast of it to me. I am in a little private retreat in Winford. I do not know how many people are here; but I do not think that, aside from one or two show patients, the rest are any more insane than I am. I did not know that such a place could exist. There are men, women and even children, all of them prisoners. He still calls himself 'Doctor Morrison' and seems very sure of himself. He has told me, of course, that our marriage was a farce and that I am to marry him or stay here all my life. I hate and fear him even more than I used to; but I have let him think that he could frighten me into marrying him. He has always wanted me to marry him, you know. This I am giving to one of the maids, who loves me for some reason, and whom I think I can trust. But hurry, dear love, and come for me, for I love you and am afraid. Be very careful; for, by its very nature, this place is under the most careful guard. You are in all my thoughts and prayers.

"NANCY ELLSWORTH."

I read and re-read the note until I had it by heart, and then, carefully, I burned it; for I was no longer so confident of the security of my pockets; burned it, that is, all but the last line and the signature. I risked nothing by keeping them, and I could not find it in my heart to destroy this wonderful mystic union of Nancy's written name and my own. "Nancy Ellsworth," I had never even dared to say it to myself.

The name Winford I knew well, or at least the name of the town which I am here calling Winford. Times have changed since then, and, wrong as everything was, I have no wish to cast stigma on a place that has been swept clean. So Winford is as different a name from the real one as anything I can contrive. I say that I knew the name well, and yet that was about all that I did know about the town, save that it was somewhere in the northern part of New York state. It was, I believed, little more than a village. I could reach it in less than a day, so that, although a perverse fate still held the name of the man in the brown derby from me, it would not be many hours before I had it from him himself. Nancy, of course, thought that I already knew it, was sure that Mrs. Lathrop had given me her note, the note which may have ended with his name. It was a name evidently so familiar, and so distasteful, that the caution of repeating it had not occurred to her. It would have made things easier, but, after all, I had the essential fact, and knew where she was. Surely there must be a train that night and, at any rate, it would not take me long to find out; but when I had given my number and stood waiting for the railroad information bureau's answer, I realized that I was beginning to learn very thoroughly of late what fear was. Perhaps there was only one train a day, and that did not leave until some time in the morning. I think I must have startled that impersonal human time-table who answered my call by replying quite unconsciously, " Thank God," when he told me that I could go on to Syracuse that night and connect with the train for Winford in the morning; but I suppose a human time-table must hear many queer things.

My train did not leave until nine, which gave me five hours to make whatever preparations I wished; twice as much time as I needed and five times as much time as I desired. But I had barely hung up the receiver before the telephone bell rang. The clerk's voice answered my impatient " What is it? "

" There's a lady down here," he said, " who's inquiring for you. Do you wish to see her? "

" What is her name? " I asked.

The clerk laughed.

" Another of your mysterious friends," he said. " She just wants to know if you are here, and if she can see you. She says her name doesn't matter, but I'll admit she's quite respectable. I have her waiting in the parlor."

" All right," I replied; " I'll be down in a minute."

She was so bonneted and shawled that at first I did not recognize her.

" Well, Mr. Ellsworth," she said, " I must say, you're a poor correspondent."

" Why, it's Mrs. Lathrop! " I cried. " What on earth brings you here?" Then in sudden, silly hope, "Have you heard any news?"

"I should say not. That's why I came in. I couldn't sleep a wink for thinking about you and that young lady, and I looked all this morning for a telegram or something from you. Then I just locked up the house and started for New York. It's kind of been borne in on my mind that I was a pretty big fool to let those rascals fool me. It's bad enough for a woman to fool a woman, but when a man can do it, too, it is time she was doing something about it. I argued it out to myself that if they were slick enough to fool me, you'd be a baby to them. Oh, I know, all you men think you're awfully independent and clever and all that, and I suppose you feel hurt at my speaking so plainly; but you all were babies once, you know, and you never seem to get over it the way the girl babies do. Why, Adam would have never found the spunk to get out of that baby kindergarten Eden place to a real interesting world where something was going on and folks wore clothes like grown-ups, unless Eve had put him up to it. So here I am, and here I stay until we find out something. Has anything happened already?"

"Yes," I said, "a good deal has happened. Just a few minutes ago I got a letter from my wife; so that now I know where she is, and I am going to start there to-night."

Mrs. Lathrop took off her shawl and tossed it into a chair.

"All right," she said. "What time do we have to start?"

"We?" I repeated.

"Yes, we. When I said I was here to stay I didn't mean at this hotel. I meant here, right on this job."

"But, Mrs. Lathrop," I protested, "I don't see how that is possible. In the first place it is dangerous; in the second place I am going away up in the northern part of the state."

"Well, what of it? I didn't expect to sit here in New York and twiddle my thumbs. I'm mostly a stay-at-home body, Mr. Ellsworth, but when I do start out anywhere I generally go all the way. You can't scare me with 'dangers.' What do you mean by it?"

"Well," I replied, "I was sand-bagged yesterday, for instance."

Mrs. Lathrop folded her hands decisively. "That's enough," she said; "it's even worse than I expected. Perhaps you will say, young man, that that would have happened if I had been along."

I laughed; for she looked so much like a ruffling, fierce, little bird.

"Yes, I know that's a man's answer," she said; "you always laugh when you haven't anything to say, but it's as plain as the nose on your face that you need to be taken care of. Now don't argue about it, for I'm coming along and that's all there is to it. If you think I'm going to sit there at home, doing nothing but worry myself into a nervous breakdown, you're very much mistaken."

I was puzzled. Her proposal, although it seemed so absolutely impossible, was made with such force and determination that, as a matter of fact, I really was at a loss for a reply. And the more I thought, the less impossible it seemed, and I found myself secretly arguing on her side, touched by her whole-hearted interest, and, in spite of my better judgment, pleased at the prospect of companionship.

"Very well," I said, at length, "you can come."

Mrs. Lathrop sniffed. "Thank you," she said; "I was going to do that anyhow."

"But," I went on, a little disconcerted, "I want you fully to realize that I really think you may run into some danger. I know that is a queer thing to say in these modern times of ours, but it has been proved to me already that an unscrupulous man fighting for his desire, and feeling himself above or outside the law, will use unexpected and dangerous weapons. Of course if you come I shall do my best to protect you —"

"Protect fiddlesticks," said Mrs. Lathrop; "you just get me off your mind and I will do all the protecting that's going to be done."

"Very well," I laughed, "I merely wanted to warn you. Now, Mrs. Lathrop, I have an errand to do, or rather a couple of errands. Would you rather wait for me here, or would you rather come along?"

"I would rather come along," said Mrs. Lathrop. "What are your errands?"

"I thought in the first place that I would look up a detective agency and get one of their men to help us."

"No," said Mrs. Lathrop. "Don't you go wasting your money on any of those silly detectives. I had a cousin once who hired one of them to detect who stole a silver tea-pot. And he detected around for a couple of weeks, and after he'd accused the cook, who had been with her twenty years, he got mad and sent in a bill that would have paid for a whole tea-set, and said the thief had probably melted it up. My cousin got so worked up about it that she looked over the house again herself, and found the tea-pot shoved back on the pantry shelf. Those fellows are just a waste of money. If you and I can't find out anything that needs to be found out, nobody can. What's your other errand?"

I gave up the detective without argument, as I felt reluctant myself to engage one. "My other errand," I said, "is to buy a good revolver."

"That errand's just as foolish as the other one," Mrs. Lathrop commented decisively. "Land knows, you look strong enough to take care of yourself without one; and a revolver is a dreadful temptation. A body gets pushed in a corner, or gets mad or something, especially if he happens to be a young man like you, and the first thing he knows he has gone and shot somebody and trouble's just commenced. The real gun's the kind I carry." Before my amazed eyes she reached for a small traveling-bag, opened it, and took out what seemed to me a very serviceable revolver. "Now this," she continued, "is of some use and doesn't ever get you into any trouble. You see, it looks like a revolver and so does all the scaring necessary when there's any scaring to be done; and when you have to shoot, it shoots; but it doesn't go making holes in people that you can't undo. It's what they call a Ki-yi gun. Maybe you know them. They carry them in automobiles for dogs sometimes. This one I keep for tramps, I live alone so much. It works with a spring and a bulb somewhere on its insides, and you load it with water, or cologne, or ammonia, or whatever you want; it all depends on how mean your disposition is. This time I put in some household ammonia before I left the house in hopes I might get a crack at that trained nurse. The last tramp I shot I only used cologne. I guess you could have heard him roar for half a mile. I suppose he thought he had been blinded for life. It stops them every time, Mr. Ellsworth, and that's all you need of a gun."

The idea was so original and so plausible that Mrs. Lathrop rose still further in the high place she held in my estimation.

"I am quite convinced, Mrs. Lathrop," I said. "I see that I am to be under very good protection."

Mrs. Lathrop smiled. "I suppose you mean that for a joke, but you just wait and see. Have you all the money you need? Because I have brought some in case you didn't happen to have."

I stretched out my hand to her. "I can not see," I said, "why you are so kind to me, why you are upsetting your life and throwing yourself into such a doubtful adventure for me; but God bless you for it, all the same."

Mrs. Lathrop took my hand and patted it, releasing it with a sudden, embarrassed little gesture.

"Oh, well, Mr. Ellsworth, somehow I've sort of taken to you," she said, "and I quite lost my heart to that poor young lady. Then, too, I want to get even with that doctor and that nurse. I don't suppose you'd believe it, but it's so; I get awful tired of living there alone with nothing ever happening. It's one reason I rent my rooms; just to see a new face once in a while; and even that isn't what you'd call leading exactly an exciting life. I says to myself last night. 'Sarah Lathrop, even if your heart wasn't in it, which it is, here's a chance for you to get right out where things are doing, and travel around a little and get over the fidgets.' If I was a man, Mr. Ellsworth, I sometimes am afraid that I might have been a highway robber, I do get so tired of just the same thing every day."

Her expression was such an incongruous mixture of swaggering, swashbuckling abandon and awed apology at the darkness of her own conception of herself, that I could not keep from laughing.

"Laugh if you like," said Mrs. Lathrop, "and I do suppose it's funny, but all the same it must be pretty pleasant to go galloping down the road in a black mask with swords and knives and pistols all over you, and the lord mayor's watch in your pocket, and the king's soldiers beating the woods for you. Suppose you ring for some tea, Mr. Ellsworth, and tell me about how you got sand-bagged."

So over the tea-cups I told the story of my recent adventures (not without some shame for the part I had played in them), to this little, bird-like woman, who, but for the matter of a kind heart, sex, and a century or so, might have been galloping away with the timepiece of the outraged head of a corrupt municipal government.

XIX

A JOURNEY TO THE COUNTRY

IT was a novel experience to talk to another human being about myself; but Mrs. Lathrop had the wonderful and unusual conversational gift of being able to listen, and I soon found it easy and pleasant enough, as I suppose any man does once he is given the opportunity. She interrupted me from time to time with an abrupt question or caustic comment; so that, when dinner time came unexpectedly, we walked into the dining-room together with a firm feeling of friendship that ably counterfeited an acquaintanceship of years' standing, and for the morrow we had made and discussed a hundred plans.

"Now," said Mrs. Lathrop, as we sat down at table, "we aren't going to say a thing here in this dining-room about what we're going to do. I don't suppose either of us can get it entirely out of our heads, but we are going to try to all we can. Little interests are the only things to talk about when you are eating. I've always held that, while you're considering a good dinner at all, it deserves the first consideration. It isn't very often, either, that I dine with a young gentleman in a New York hotel, and I want you to help me make the most of it. Please order the nicest things you know how, outlandish things, if we can make a meal of them, and things nobody could find in a cook-book. It's a pleasure once in a while to eat something you can't even pronounce. Everyday food is good enough for every day, but on special occasions even beef is better for being in disguise."

I looked over the bill of fare, therefore, with care and deliberation, and to please her gave the whole order in French to the waiter.

"That's perfectly lovely," said Mrs. Lathrop; "I couldn't understand a word you said. Do you think the waiter could?"

"Well, he pretended he could," I replied, "so he'll probably bring us something."

I strongly suspect that this was all a device of my new friend's to beguile me, for a little, away from my weariness and anxiety. And although, try as I would, I could not quite put away my mental uneasiness, yet even the trying helped, and I got up from the table strengthened and refreshed. In fact, we had eaten with such Epicurean leisure that we found we had only just a comfortable amount of time in which to make the train. The subway station was not far off, and we walked to it through the pleasant May evening. When we were near it Mrs. Lathrop laid a hand upon my arm.

"Perhaps," she said, "I am hypnotized with too much story of adventure and very likely I am foolish, but it does seem to me, Mr. Ellsworth, as if you were being followed again."

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"Well, ever since we left the hotel, there has been a man about half a block back, who has taken every turn that we have and who has never caught up to us or dropped any more behind."

"You may be right," I said. "We shall see as soon as we get into the subway."

So, after we descended the stairs, instead of crossing directly to the ticket booth, we stepped aside into an angle. Two or three people hurried past us. I was following one of them with my eyes, when abruptly Mrs. Lathrop pinched my arm, and I looked up to see the gaunt form of the Reverend Mr. Stevens. He stood almost with his back to us, anxiously scanning the platform. After an agonizing moment he moved forward.

"Yes," I whispered to Mrs. Lathrop, "that is the man who married me, the man of the Seventh Avenue saloon, the man who probably sand-bagged me in the park."

"He looks ornery enough," she whispered back. "I tell you what you do, Mr. Ellsworth. He'll turn around and see us in a moment. You just get the tickets and we'll go through. Course you couldn't do anything to him right here on the platform; besides, you've got your hands full of bags. So, when we're through the gate, we'll separate a little, and I'll meet you up by the information bureau at the Grand Central. If he sees you, you just wait as if you didn't notice, and, when the train comes in, wait until almost the last moment, and then make a dash for the door. I'll manage, somehow, to get in his way. Oh, no, I won't get hurt. I know that I'm little, but I'm wiry. Then, you see, I can come along by the next train."

"But won't he simply follow you then?" I protested.

"I don't believe so," said Mrs. Lathrop. "You see, he hasn't had a real good look at me, yet. Besides, I'm going to be in disguise."

She slipped one hand in the pocket of her jacket, and drew out and unfolded an enormous brown veil in which she triumphantly swathed her head.

"Just like Dick Turpin," she whispered parenthetically behind it. "Now, you walk a little ahead and drop in the tickets, and act as if you'd never seen me."

Her scheme seemed reasonable enough, and certainly it was imperative that we give the slip to the Reverend Mr. Stevens. So, when our tickets had been dropped into the box, I started forward, carelessly and alone, to the middle of the platform, leaving Mrs. Lathrop to stand where we had entered near its farther end. I glanced at Stevens and saw that he was watching me, but, of course, let no glint of recognition show in my own face. When the train came in I waited a moment, then made for the nearest doorway; but I had not waited quite long enough, and an absent-minded, belated passenger or so blocked the way. Over my shoulder I saw Mr. Stevens close behind me. I turned, therefore, as if I had changed my mind, and then, with a sudden dash, I ran past Mrs. Lathrop toward the waiting door in the first car of the train. As I ran I could hear him running behind me, and, passing Mrs. Lathrop, heard her say, "All right."

The thing all happened in a flash. I squeezed myself in past the door that the guard was already commencing to shut and stood for a second, squeezed in the opening, looking back over the platform. The Reverend Stevens was lying flat on his face, as if he had been struck by one of his own familiar weapons, and Mrs. Lathrop was absolutely nowhere to be seen.

The guard jerked me through the door angrily and slammed it after me, and in another moment the train began to move. And puzzling about the strange disappearance of Mrs. Lathrop, I walked back into the car, to find her sitting calmly, divesting herself of her swathing "disguise."

"How on earth," I whispered, dropping into the seat beside her, "did you manage to do that?"

Mrs. Lathrop folded her veil and put it back in her pocket, in an amused triumph she made but little effort to conceal.

"You owe me a new umbrella, Mr. Ellsworth," she said. "I broke mine sticking it between those long legs. You could hear him rattle as he came down. Scripture tells us, Mr. Ellsworth, that an eye for an eye is a wicked and by-gone rule; but I don't know that it says anything anywhere about a rib for a rib, so that I can't feel very sorry about breaking my umbrella. It's lucky that I managed to squeeze into that rear door though, for if he ever *had* been able to get up again, I guess he would have had me arrested, and you would have had to go on to Winford all alone. I would have got my picture in the paper, too, a thing which never yet has happened to any of our family."

From my wakeful upper berth that night, once or twice I heard an audible and reminiscent chuckle from that middle-aged adventuress below me, a soothing chuckle that, I think, was largely responsible for a mental relaxation which brought sleep to me; an uneasy sleep, to be sure, but one from which I awoke refreshed, to find Mrs. Lathrop already up and waiting for me as we drew into Syracuse.

We breakfasted in the station, and had an uneventful three hours' trip to Winford. Winford, like many other little towns in upper New York state, looked as if it had been picked up whole by some careful hurricane, and, being torn from its New England roots, had been gently dropped upon its present site. There was the same long village street, that split on two sides of a tree-arched, common green. The houses were white or yellow, commodious and comfortable, set apart with broad elbow room and approached by little, box-bordered walks. Big rambling houses they were, whose low attached kitchens led into still lower, but still attached, wood-sheds, which gave in turn upon barns almost as large as the houses themselves, and furnished snug and covered ways between the two-footed and the four-footed worlds, ways that must have been grateful enough on howling blizzard nights. And behind them we could see the bowered beauty of helter-skelter gardens, commencing already to bloom with the sweet, old-fashioned, familiar flowers that gladdened dead and bygone eyes in the days when America was American.

"Pretty, isn't it?" said Mrs. Lathrop. "Pretty and quiet and peaceful. I feel sometimes as if I would like nothing better than to live in a town like this for always, and then I know perfectly well that I couldn't. I don't know what it is, perhaps it is too peaceful; sort of like a cemetery."

I drew a long breath of the sweet air, that bore faintly the indescribable smell of box and the faintly cloying, unearthly fragrance of lilies of the valley.

"I know what you mean," I said. "I think it is because we have lived so long away that we feel uncomfortable among once intimate and unheeded ghosts."

For a little while both of us walked on in silence. Then Mrs. Lathrop shrugged her shoulders as if she were shrugging back common sense.

"Are you just going for a walk through the town," she asked, "or have you any definite place in mind?"

"I thought I would go to the post-office first," I said. "I have a letter to write and mail and, if there are lodgings to be had in town, we shall be apt to find notice of them there."

"I guess you're right," said Mrs. Lathrop, and for a while we walked on again in silence.

The post-office we found, as I had half expected, a branch industry of the general store. I bought paper and envelopes and, while Mrs. Lathrop poked about and asked questions of the proprietor, I sat down, by his invitation, at the post-office desk and wrote a letter to my friend, Mr. Ogilby, telling him of my letter from Nancy, my encounter with Mr. Stevens, and our journey here, and dropped it sealed and addressed into the convenient mail bag that hung open-mouthed on my side of the mail chute.

"Now you come right along, Mr. Ellsworth," said Mrs. Lathrop when I had finished writing. "You see," she continued animatedly, when we left the store, "I know as much about the town now as if I was the official guide. There isn't anybody can tell you so much about folks as the village postmaster, especially since postal-cards have got so popular. This one is a pretty talkative man, too, so that now I know nearly as much as he does. There is a sort of hotel a few doors farther on, but I don't think that we had better go there. From all I can make out, it isn't used by much of anybody except the cheap kind of traveling-men that come to such little places as this, and they're as talkative as the dressmaker. The way they sell their goods is to throw in a free budget of all the news that's happened in three states and we would be entirely too interesting to them. But there's a little place farther on where they take summer boarders, and that will look much more natural. Even so, you had better register under another name."

"Have you anything to suggest?" I asked.

"I'll lend you mine. You can write yourself down as John Lathrop, and we'll tell them you're my nephew. I'll adopt you as my nephew right now, so there won't be any lie about it."

"Thank you, Aunt Sally," I said; "I'll try to be a good nephew to you. As a matter of fact, I always have regretted my lack of an aunt."

"That's very nice of you, John," said Mrs. Lathrop.

We registered therefore as Mrs. Sarah Lathrop and John Lathrop of New Haven, Connecticut, a city we both knew well enough to answer questions about. Being early comers, we got good rooms in the front of the house, and at luncheon had the dining-room mostly to ourselves.

"We have come to the right place," said Mrs. Lathrop, as we got up from table.

"Yes, it's very decent," I answered.

"I mean the right town," said Mrs. Lathrop. "I thought I'd let you get your luncheon in peace, John, before telling you. But I was looking out of my window just before I came down, and there went that Doctor Morrison walking up the street as bold as brass, and scowling as though he had a grudge against all the world."

XX

NANCY AGAIN

THE "sanatorium" we found with some difficulty. Even at our lodgings we were afraid to ask open questions or to betray any direct object for our visit. Nancy's letter had been so positive that the place was guarded with extraordinary precaution (and indeed, if the place was what she thought it was, its proprietors had need of the utmost vigilance), that we felt sure they must have some means of keeping in touch with all the current news of the town, and that the inquisitiveness of new arrivals would soon be brought to their notice. So, although the only plan we thought of was an indirect and a slow one, yet we chose it for its very safety. It consisted simply in having ourselves driven about the country in our easy rôle of summer visitors, and in asking questions of the driver about every place we passed.

It was late in the afternoon before we found it, an innocent-looking place enough, I suppose, but to me, knowing what I did, and with the thought of Nancy shut up there, it seemed as menacingly dismal as the House of Usher.

Certainly its architecture was sufficiently horrible. It was one of those singular architectural freaks more common to forty years ago than to the saner present time, and was built, I suppose, to represent a Rhine castle; for it was broad and rather low, with here and there an unmeaning turret, and with its flat roof hidden by castellated battlements. In stone it might have been a dignified eyesore, but in its palpable wooden imitation it was a ludicrous one.

The place was somewhat in disrepair. Here and there a battlement had rotted and fallen away, or an oblong discoloration of the walls showed the loss of a plank that had once hardily masqueraded as granite. Even the ivy, that ran darkly over its walls, and stretched lighter tendrils to the roof itself, seemed not so much the happy refuge of a thousand twittering birds, as all decent ivy should, but rather some great wave that had swept sullenly against the rotting, tawdry splendor, running its devouring fingers to the falling battlements, a wave that must slowly recede again and with its next surge engulf this obstructing corruption in its own. When we had driven past, and I looked back at it, the windows on that side reflected in distortion some brightness of the sun, and I saw for the first time that they were barred. Mrs. Lathrop sitting beside me gave a little shiver.

"Are you cold?" I asked her.

"No," she answered shortly; nor during the rest of our drive, which I now made as brief as possible, did she vouchsafe another word. But when we had gone up to our private sitting-room she turned to me.

"What are you going to do now, Mason Ellsworth?" she asked.

"I am going right back," I said, "as quickly as I safely can. I don't quite know what I am going to do when I get there, but of course I am going to find Nancy if possible, and if I can't, I'm going to reconnoiter and see how I can get into the place."

"Well, hurry," said Mrs. Lathrop.

"You may be sure I will do that," I replied. "It was yourself who advised me to go slow."

"I know," said Mrs. Lathrop, "and of course you must go slow, but for all that, hurry as much as you can; for I did not fully realize what it was until I saw it. My heart is cold with it yet; and that sweet young lady is in there, and I am partly responsible."

"That, of course, is absurd," I answered. "If anybody is responsible, I am. But I shall have her out of there, Mrs. Lathrop, even if I have to hurt somebody to do it."

"Hurt anybody you like," she snapped; "I'm sure they deserve it; only be careful not to get yourself in trouble. Remember, you have to keep yourself free and unhampered."

When I got back to the place again, I hid myself behind a big clump of bushes on the opposite side of the road. Behind me was empty farm land, so that I felt myself secure from observation and able to give my undivided attention to studying the sanatorium and the grounds about it.

I sat for some time peering through the branches of my leafy cover, and had about made up my mind that the guard was less vigilant than Nancy supposed, when a man came into view about the eastern corner of the place. He looked about him cautiously for a moment, and called up, apparently to the blank wall of ivy, "Hey, Jim."

"Yes," a voice answered, "what is it?"

"Got a chew?" the man asked.

From behind the battlements of the roof another figure rose.

"Sure," he said; "catch," and tossed something to the waiting man below. "What time is it?" he asked.

"About half-past five," the man on the ground answered. "I wish it was six."

"So do I," said the man on the roof, and sank down out of sight, while the other resumed his leisurely round.

But now that I knew where to look, from time to time, I could catch a glimpse of the forehead and eyes of the man on the roof, as he peered cautiously through the castellated barrier; and I thanked Heaven that I had hidden myself, and was doubly thankful that evidently I had been able to hide myself unobserved. Apparently at six o'clock the guards were to be changed, and I wondered if the place was so watched and patrolled both night and day. I knew, at least, that the night would be dark, and that the moon, by which I had seen the night prowler at Marbury, would no longer make the world too bright for prowlings of my own.

I settled myself down behind my bush, stretching out my cramped limbs to wait as best I could the coming darkness. Infrequent pedestrians passed my hiding-place, and once or twice some country conveyance rattled by; but no one stopped or made any attempt to go into the sanatorium. Indeed, I thought the villagers who passed me quickened their pace a little as they went by the grounds and glanced askance at the ominous old building as if it were something to fear. At ten minutes to six the watchman who patrolled the grounds passed in front of the building, and at ten minutes past another man, whom I supposed to be his six o'clock relief, came into view. This man, I noticed with regret, was much more careful and alert, probably a more trustworthy person for the difficult night watch. But I was encouraged to find that these rounds of the watchman were made with an almost exact regularity, that there were twenty minutes between each coming and going. And I hoped, once darkness had set in, to be able to do much in those twenty minutes. Of course there was always the watchman on the roof, but, if the night were dark enough, I thought my chances good of escaping observation.

But darkness, which in a working day seems to come so unexpectedly, as if it were thrown over the world like a great blanket, lingered unbelievably. The tender glory of sunset grayed into twilight as slowly as if some new and not quite omnipotent Joshua, unable absolutely to stop the sun, had at least malignly retarded it just below the horizon line. But at length twilight was an accomplished thing, and with it the windows in the building opposite flared here and there into barred oblongs of brightness, until dark shades were drawn, and the windows were only thin, penciled, golden parallelograms in the somber blankness of the impenetrable wall of black. It was ten minutes of nine before I judged it dark enough to make my attempt. The watchman, I thought, must just have passed.

Through my long watch I had studied the place very carefully, in imagination pacing over and over again the road I should take to the building, so that now I stole across the road and the soft grass of the lawn, going without a stumble, as softly as a burglar might, until with my hand I felt the wall before me. I had chosen the place where the ivy seemed thickest; for it was to be my ladder to the rooms above. Now, as I searched gently among the leaves for the giant parent stem, I heard a little, half-suppressed cough. I had come a moment or two too soon.

It had grown so dark that I could not see the watchman, who was approaching me, save only where his face made a lighter blur in the darkness, and the white line of his collar showed more distinctly beneath it. I turned up the collar of my coat to hide my own, and, with my head bowed, backed close to the wall into the cool, soft mass of long-stemmed ivy leaves. I do not know whether he heard anything or not, but he stopped just in front of me, and I could distinctly smell the hot lacquer of his closed bull's-eye lantern, and hear his breathing even above the pounding of my heart. Then fate was good to both of us; he saved his neck and continued on his rounds.

When I was sure that he must have turned the corner, I slowly and cautiously began my climb, feeling along the mighty stem and its looped and twisted branches, as, holding myself tight against the wall, I climbed in the darkness with groping hand and foot. I must have mounted ten feet, when I came upon a false window, a blank niche set into the wall after the purposeless fashion of those days of architectural atrocity. As I pulled myself up into it the night stillness was suddenly shattered by the frightened shrilling of innumerable sparrows. I shrank back into the niche, holding myself close, and as much behind the vines as possible; for I heard the soft whistle of the man on the roof, and the thudding footsteps of the returning watchman.

"What is it?" said the man on the ground.

"Don't know," the one above answered, "but something has frightened the birds. Listen to them."

The man on the ground grunted. "That's right. Something's troubling them. Better have a look." And, as he spoke, a long pencil of light streamed from his unshuttered lantern and began to waver rapidly over the base of the wall.

The ivy leaves were densely thick over the depression in which I stood, but I very much doubted if I could remain concealed, and thought that at best I could only fight for it, and get away perhaps with my face unknown. The lantern light was picking out vivid patches of ivy leaves, sweeping from side to side along the length of the building, and with every sweep mounting a little higher. Suddenly the watchman started forward, striking out with his stick, which mowed half an armful of leaves from the wall; and into the vivid circle of the lantern's light leaped a great black cat with blazing eyes, a very devil of a cat that, yet, must surely have been Heaven sent.

"What is it?" called the voice from the roof.

The man below me laughed and shut his lantern slide.

"Cookie's cat on a still hunt," he replied, "but his eyes looked out at me as if some of them really had gone loony."

"Careful," said the man on the roof.

The birds were still circling around me in the darkness, lighting and flying off restlessly again, scolding, chattering and screaming as sparrows will, and, as I knew that I must disturb still more of them, I climbed quickly, under cover of the present disturbance. In a minute more of climbing I came to a window, open, save for the bars before it, and a green drawn curtain inside which scarcely stirred in the soft May air. Very cautiously I stretched my hand out and pushed the shade aside the fraction of an inch, until I could see the room within. It was bare as a room in a hospital; a dejected-looking young man sat on the edge of the bed, reading a tattered paper novel, and he was all alone. I released the curtain, and edged along sideways to the next lighted window. In this room a middle-aged woman paced the floor nervously, and, after a glance, I went along still farther, peering in window after window, as I came to them; and with each glimpse into the barren brightness, my anger rose.

It seemed scarcely possible that such a place could exist, that in a kindly world such heartless cruelty could be planned and countenanced by man; for, as

Nancy had written me, here were men, women and even children, each one locked in and alone, and each, as far as I was able to judge, absolutely sane. There were many faces, to be sure, where sorrow had written indelible lines; faces where any last gleam of hope seemed to have flickered and gone out, leaving the mind drearily blank, a sterile field, ploughed and made ready for the poison seeds of madness. I was tempted more than once to tear the very bars from the window and to fight my way in to whatever devil might be in charge, that he might lead me the more quickly to Nancy. Once I had found her, once I had her safe and beyond this present danger, I made up mind that these other unfortunates, who suffered here with her, who had some of them probably been here for years, should be set free, that the whole abomination should be opened up with the flooding light of state authority. But now I cared only to find Nancy herself, to find her and take her away.

Once, as I paused before a window, I was nearly discovered; for an old gentleman raised the shade of the room with a jerk, that he might look out restlessly into the night. It was only his poor eyesight and the unaccustomed darkness that gave me time to dodge beyond his range of vision. I had come to the last window of all, and had raised the shade perfunctorily before climbing to the floor above, when I found Nancy.

XXI

A WORD

THE room was much like the others into which I had looked, bare, with a sort of sickening imitation of institutional cleanliness. The walls were unrelieved by a single picture, and save that they were here and there blotched or cracked with age, looked, as I have said, very much like the walls of a private room in a hospital. The broad boards of the floor were bare also, and at some rather remote time had been painted a nondescript green. The room was almost without furnishings. A rickety dresser stood against one wall, a painted iron-frame wash-stand with tin pitcher and bowl occupied a corner, and across the room from the dresser and against the opposite wall was a little, single, iron bed, whose coverings, although clean, were in a state of crying disrepair. There was also a wooden chair in the room, as there was in each of the others. The only piece of furniture that at all distinguished it was a great, tumbledown, easy chair, whose tattered velvet was half hidden by an old steamer rug.

Nancy was seated in this chair with her back turned almost squarely upon the window. The dress in which I had last seen her had been replaced by a plain garment of striped gingham such as trained nurses wear, and which, I suppose, was an extra precaution against her escape, a modified form of prison dress. Some little rustle of the window shade, perhaps, made her turn her face toward the window, and I saw that she was pale and had been crying.

"Nancy," I whispered, "Nancy."

She sprang to her feet and stood looking about her, one slim hand raised fearfully to her heart. "Did somebody call?" she asked.

"Don't be frightened," I said. "It is I, Mason. Here at the window."

She crossed the room uncertainly, as if she had heard many voices of late, or had waited so anxiously to hear, that now she could not believe.

"You, Mason. You!" she whispered.

"Yes, I climbed up the ivy. I am here at the window. I have come to take you home again."

She knelt on the floor beside the window, and I raised the shade a little, so that now we looked into each other's eyes.

"My dear, my dear," I said, "are you well? Is everything all right here?"

Nancy drew a long, shuddering breath. "Oh, Mason, I am so glad, glad you have come. I have been so worried about you. I was afraid — afraid they might have killed you."

"I don't think they would go quite so far as that," I laughed.

"I don't know, Mason," Nancy said very seriously. "They frighten me. They are capable of almost anything wicked, desperate or wrong, and I am afraid for you even now. It is mad of you to be clinging there with your face to the bright light. I am going to pull down the shade."

"Don't," I said. "The watchman won't be round again for ten minutes at least, and I want to see you."

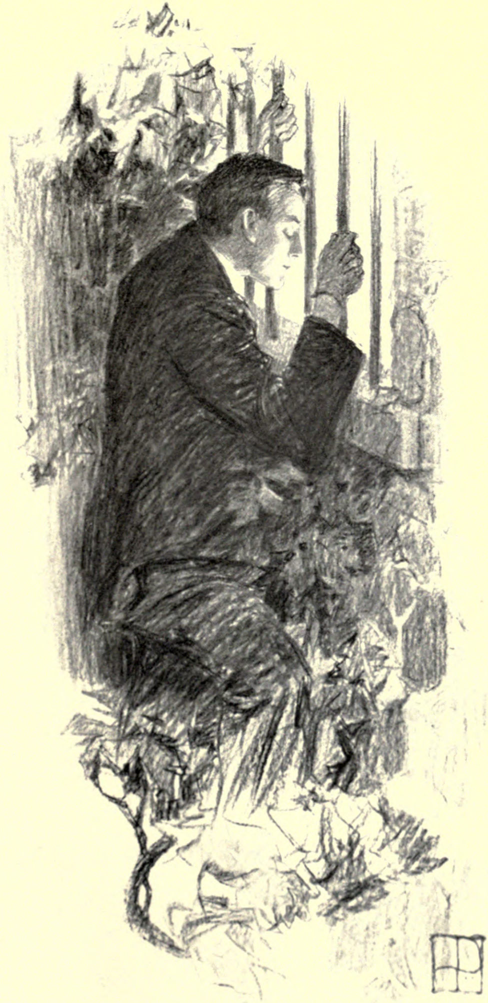
"No," said Nancy, "it is too dangerous. I am going to pull it down. We can talk just as well from different sides of the curtain."

"But —" I protested.

"No," said Nancy firmly, "it has to be." Then with a little flush and so softly that I could scarcely hear the whisper, "Kiss me, dear."

She bent forward so that her face pressed close against the cruel, rusting bars of iron, the wondrous mystery of her beauty tenderly enfolding her. The dear, brave eyes looked into mine for an eternal instant, then fell as I bent and kissed her lips. The agonies of hell could not have frightened me then.

"You are coming with me now, now," I said, and stretched one hand to a bar of the iron grating, which bent in my hand.



" Nancy," I whispered, " Nancy "

Nancy caught my wrist with a quick, restraining little gesture. " No, Mason, not that way," she said. " It is too dangerous for you. Yes, too dangerous for both of us. I am going to pull down the shade, and you must talk to me quietly; for of course you can take me away, to-morrow, perhaps, and there is no immediate danger."

" No danger," I repeated; " why, Nancy, the place is horrible."

" Then you had better not look at it any more," said Nancy, and pulled down the shade. " Really, dear," she continued, " it is best for both of us. Even suppose that you could break these bars, and I almost think you could, Mason, you would have to carry me down the way you came, and it would be very hard for you to do, even if the ivy were strong enough to hold us. Can you hear me?"

" Yes," I answered, " and I suppose you are right." For the possibility of the ivy breaking under our combined weight, and of the fall for Nancy, cooled my flare of anger like a dash of cold water. " I will come around to-morrow morning, then, and get in on some pretext or other. Let them stop me if they can."

For a moment Nancy did not answer.

" Listen, dear," she said at length. " I do not know how it is going to be done. You must think of that. But, if possible, I want you to take me away from here quietly, to depend on your wit and not your strength. For these men here have everything at stake. This sanatorium has been running for a good many years now, so that I think that none of them would stop at murder itself to prevent open exposure. It is a very hazardous business, and it means prison for them if they are caught. They must have counted on that, Mason. I think they are protected by the town authorities here in some way, but I am very sure that, rather than fall into the hands of the state law, they would not hesitate to kill you. Dear heart, you must not risk all I have in the world because you are impatient for me."

She was speaking almost in a whisper; but through the soft, low tones of the voice I loved, sounded a new and vibrant quality, a new-found something as old as humanity itself, the gentle, omniscient wisdom of a woman to the man she loves. What man is there that must not bow to it, yet feel himself the more a man?

"You are right," I said. "I suppose it is the savage in me that makes me want to fight, Nancy. But, after all, as long as I get you, the way does not so very much matter. You remember Mrs. Lathrop, do you not — where you spent the first night after — after they took you?"

"Very well," said Nancy. "Did she give you my note?"

"Yes, dear," I said; "she gave me the note, and yesterday she came to the Hotel Gloria and insisted on coming to help to find you. She thinks me a rather helpless individual, I am afraid, but I have a vague idea that she really can help us, Nancy. I do not know how, just at this moment, but perhaps —"

"Hush," said Nancy; "listen!"

"What is it?"

"I think they are coming, Mason,— the doctors, you know. You must go at once and go carefully. Do you understand?"

I heard some one knock at the door.

"You are going, Mason?"

"As soon as I can," I said, "when the watchman's gone by."

Nancy's little hand flashed beneath the shade for a moment, and I kissed it. "Good night, dear," I said.

"Good night," Nancy whispered.

The knock was repeated with loud insistence.

"Yes," Nancy called. "Come in."

I lowered myself a foot or more, so that my head was an inch or two below the level of the sill, and held myself close against the wall, for I thought that I heard the soft footstep of the watchman below.

"Well, Miss Bond, how do you find yourself this evening?"

The voice was a deep one, and the question was rapped out with the brisk assumption of cheeriness of the professional man.

"I am quite as usual," I heard Nancy answer gently.

"That's good, that's good. Delusion beginning to fade?"

"I am afraid that delusion, as you call it," Nancy answered, "will never fade. Doctor Mayhew, what is the use of it? You can't very well keep me here all my life, and I warn you I am going to persist in my delusion."

"We have cured worse cases than yours," the doctor answered curtly.

"I can not understand it," Nancy said.

"Understand what?"

"Why you should be here, and doing this sort of thing, Doctor Mayhew. That you, a gentleman, should have fallen on such evil days; that you can stoop to such meannesses as this present one, just for a little money; that you can school yourself to persecute a lonely girl, for a few hundred dollars or so. Oh, I know you are getting rich here, but is it worth all that you are giving up, Doctor Mayhew?"

"When a man of my profession falls once, he falls for good," was the doctor's quite unexpected answer.

There was bitterness and shame in the doctor's voice, and I drew myself up to the sill again, listening intently; for perhaps here Nancy herself was finding a way, a peaceful way after her own heart.

"I think you are mistaken," she answered. "I do not know just what you have done; but a man can always make his way in the world, if he is willing to try, and try honestly. That is, almost always. Of course, if you make one slip here, if a single 'patient' is able against your will to find his way back to the world, that will mean state's prison for you, Doctor Mayhew. And state's prison for such a crime as this means the end of opportunity. You must have made a great deal of money already. Can't you give this place up while you are still safe?"

"To be perfectly frank with you, Miss Bond," the doctor said, "I wish I could, but that is harder than you innocently suppose."

As I have it here in black and white, it sounds impossible, this sudden dropping of the mask, this almost open confession. But as I clung listening outside the window, there seemed nothing strange about it. For although I dared not look, I knew how sweetly Nancy stood before him, and every little tone of her voice thrilled with a gentle conviction and charm which must, I thought, have moved any man.

But another knock sounded at the door. Doctor Mayhew's "Come in," was once more incisively professional.

"Good evening, Doctor Morrison," I heard him say. "Good evening, Mrs. Olsen. I am sorry not to be able to report much progress."

I caught an undertone of anger in the words, as if the man, startled from a dream, repented angrily his moment of weakness.

"Delusion still continues?"

"I am afraid so," said Doctor Mayhew. "What course do you think we had better pursue, Doctor Morrison?"

"With your permission," said Doctor Morrison, "I should like a few minutes' talk alone with the patient, before I come to a decision."

The door opened and closed, and for a moment there was silence.

"Still stubborn?" the unpleasant voice asked at last.

"I shall never change my mind," Nancy answered; "you ought to know that."

"You are acting like a fool, Nancy. Do you honestly think you are married?"

"That has nothing to do with it," Nancy answered quietly.

"It has a great deal to do with it. You are making a fool of yourself for this man. How often must I tell you the marriage was a farce and Stevens a common jail-bird? The man you think you married isn't any better than he is. Even you know he did it for the money that was in it. Perhaps it would interest you to know," he continued in rising anger, "that the scamp has laid hands on all the money he could, and that yesterday he sailed for Europe. Your hero isn't worth your heroics, Nancy."

Nancy laughed softly.

"You've always been a liar," she said.

"I swear that is true at least," he replied. "I would stake my life on it. How long do you expect me to be patient? I want to marry you, and I will be as good a husband as any man, you know that. You don't suppose that I am going to wait for ever. After all, why should I be so patient with you?"

"Because," Nancy said softly, "because, after all, you are a coward and very careful of yourself; and because, really, you are a little afraid of me. You can't keep me here all my life. I know that, and so do you. Sooner or later I will get back to my husband."

Doctor Morrison laughed.

"My husband," Nancy repeated. "You have felt Mason Ellsworth's fingers once. I do not think that you care to risk death again."

"Damn your husband!" he said. "I'm through with this foolishness. I give you one more day, Nancy. We have an easy way here of handling people who are too stubborn. I think you will marry me willingly enough."

He stepped across to the door, and in some distant corridor I heard the muffled whir of an electric bell. I raised the curtain the fraction of an inch and looked into the room. " Doctor Morrison " was standing with his great sloping shoulders hunched forward, broad hands opening and shutting in ugly impatience, beneath his long nose the strange baby mouth worked convulsively, while his close-set eyes, vicious with sullen rage, flickered and shifted from Nancy's head to her feet, never quite looking into hers, but challenging her and desiring her. Then as the door opened:

" Doctor Mayhew," he said hoarsely, " I find that our treatment has so far been a failure. We will wait till to-morrow, and then, if there is no change, Miss Bond is to be moved to the dark room. Do you understand me? "

Doctor Mayhew, a stout, florid young man of about thirty-five, flushed to the roots of his yellow hair.

" Do — do you think that is necessary? " he stammered.

" Quite," the other snapped; " and Mrs. Olsen, you are to sleep here to-night."

" Very well, doctor," said Mrs. Olsen, who was evidently the nurse Mrs. Lathrop detested so much.

Nancy sighed and seated herself on the edge of the bed.

Doctor Mayhew had already left. " Morrison " stood in the door, a smile working at his baby mouth.

"Good night, Miss Bond," he said.

Nancy did not answer, and still smiling, he went out, shutting the door behind him.

XXII

THE DOCTORS

BECAUSE I had promised Nancy, I climbed down the ivy again, as softly as I could, and gained the road unobserved. But it was the most difficult restraint that I ever put upon myself. If I could have had my way I should, at least, have tried to tear away the iron grating from the window, and to fight my way down-stairs and through the sanatorium, and perhaps be able to lay my hands upon Doctor Morrison. I was sure that, once in the room, I would have been able to take Nancy away with me. But Nancy wished me to use other means if I could, and, as far as I was able, I was determined to try them. My own way, after all, was a selfish one, and inspired for the most part by a lust for fighting that was growing on me daily. But Nancy was right; fighting should only be a last resort. For it was even possible that Nancy herself might come to some harm in that seething turmoil my soul so longed for.

I found Mrs. Lathrop pacing about her little sitting-room at the hotel.

"Ah," she said, as I opened the door, "I was beginning to get a little worried. I never did see time go so slowly."

"I had to wait for dark," I explained.

"Did you see her?" asked Mrs. Lathrop.

"Yes," I said, and told her all my adventure.

"Well, what are you going to do now?" said Mrs. Lathrop. "It looks to me as if it would be pretty hard to get any one out of a sanatorium that's barred and locked up, without using force."

"I don't know exactly what I can do," I admitted. "The only plan I've been able to think of so far is to go up and ask to see the doctor, and when I see him, tie him up and take his keys away from him."

"Do you call that not using force?" Mrs. Lathrop asked.

I smiled rather sheepishly.

"Of course that's only tentative," I said, "and it wouldn't take very much force. That Doctor Mayhew looks pretty soft to me."

"Still, I don't think that was Mrs. Ellsworth's idea of it," said Mrs. Lathrop.

"Perhaps not," I admitted. "What have you to suggest?"

Mrs. Lathrop shook her head.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said; "I'll think a little while."

So for half an hour we sat in silence. Once or twice I started to speak, but Mrs. Lathrop waved me abstractedly away.

"Well," she said at last, "I have it."

"Well?" I asked.

"I'm crazy," said Mrs. Lathrop complacently.

"You're what?" I stammered.

"Crazy. At least, I'm not, but you say I am. Listen, Mr. Ellsworth. I'm your aunt, just as we told them here at the hotel, and I'm dreadful rich and you're a scamp; that is, you've got to manage to look like one, although, dear knows, that's the weakest part of it. The rest is all easy enough. You take me in a cab up to that sanatorium, and ring the bell and go in with me. You'll hold me by the wrist, you know, and I'll drag back." Mrs. Lathrop's eyes snapped with the joy of the prospective drama. "And when we're in the office, you ask to have the door locked, so that I can't get away. Then you pull the doctor over to one side and tell him about it. Say you want to leave me there indefinitely. Course he needn't believe I'm crazy at all, but what he has got to believe is just as hard, maybe harder, for I'm a good actor and you're not; and that is, that you're a wicked young man, and are putting me out of the way, so that you can declare me incompetent, and use my money, or something like that. Money's got to come into it somehow. It's the only thing, I guess, those people up there understand."

"But," I protested, "what good would that do? Suppose I could manage to leave you there, what then? They'd only lock you up in one of those rooms. You couldn't do anything, and then I'd just have two people to get out instead of one."

"Well, that's just it," said Mrs. Lathrop. "Most of those poor people there have naturally been left without a cent of money. You aren't going to be that mean to me. In fact, I guess you'd better give me about all the money you've got. I figure it out that any nurse or maid who is wicked enough to work there at all would be wicked enough to make four or five hundred dollars, if it was cash in hand, and she saw a way of doing it easy. Then, as soon as I have bought one of those maids, I'll fix it so that she lets me out and Mrs. Ellsworth too, and all you'll have to do is to wait outside and meet us. I'll fix it to get a message to you somehow."

"Well, there's another trouble," I said; "a trouble I don't see how we can get around; that Doctor Morrison, as he calls himself, would recognize us both in a minute."

"I've thought of that, Mr. Ellsworth. We'll just have to choose some time when Doctor Morrison isn't there. Unless I'm pretty much mistaken, Doctor Morrison isn't connected with the place at all. They just let him hang around and call himself a doctor because he's paid them a lot of money.

There's only one patient he takes any interest in, or is a doctor for. I don't see why they take the trouble to pretend that much, unless it's because they've pretended so long, they couldn't do a thing straight if they tried. No, sir, we'll just wait until he's away from the place and down here in the village somewhere, and the rest will go as slick as a goose's neck. Well, what are you shaking your head about now?"

"The nurse, Mrs. Olsen," I answered gloomily.

"See here," said Mrs. Lathrop, jumping up in disgust, "it seems to me as if I never did see such a young man to find fault. We'll just have to risk that woman. I don't believe that, by the build of her, they let her take care of any but the 'violents.' The trouble with you is that you want to do this thing all yourself."

I flushed; for although I had not recognized it, my feeling had been that I was playing a rather small part in the affair, that I would have to eat my heart out in idleness while this little woman did the dangerous work.

"Oh, it's perfectly natural," said Mrs. Lathrop. "A young man going after the lady he loves always wants to run into danger and hit people and make a terrible time. That's the only reason there ever were knights, I guess. But you take my advice, Mr. Ellsworth. You get the young lady safely home first, and then you can go back and do the hitting and knight part of it afterward. You go to bed now, and try to wake up feeling like my scoundrelly nephew. Of course, if you can think of any better scheme before morning, why, I'm perfectly willing to try it, but if you can't, I think we ought to try this one. And I'm sure that neither of us can rest easy until we get her out of there."

And although I tossed half the night racking my brains, Mrs. Lathrop was right, I could think of no better scheme.

"The only trouble," Mrs. Lathrop said, as I met her at breakfast, "is that we've got to be sure when that Doctor Morrison is away. We'll have to spell each other watching at the window for him. You watch, while I write to my sister; then I'll take a turn, while you write to that Mr. Ogilby. You've a lot to tell him, and you've got to keep your promise to him, you know, particularly as we're just going to spend so much of his money. I'm writing to my sister, just to make sure of things. I've got to tell her something about it; but you needn't be afraid; she isn't one of those newsy women. If I tell her not to talk about a thing, she won't. It occurred to me last night, Mr. Ellsworth, after I'd got the light out, that you and I ought to do this as carefully as we can. I don't mean that I was the least mite scared, but something might happen not according to schedule, and it's just as well to have some one know where we are, in case we should suddenly disappear. So I'm going to write her that unless she hears from me again in a couple of days, she's to come on here with all the king's horses and all the king's men (which is poetry for the governor's), and split that Humpty-dumpty, wooden castle into kindling wood."

This was a precaution the wisdom of which I could not gainsay, so that I watched while Mrs. Lathrop wrote, and when she relieved me, incorporated something of the same idea in my letter to Mr. Ogilby. Then I posted both our letters, and ordered the hotel's only closed carriage to be ready and waiting for instant call; which mysterious proceeding I think the hotel proprietor put down to metropolitan eccentricity, an eccentricity which justified one of his own in making out our bill.

We had not very long to wait before Doctor Morrison came striding down the street, as gloomily truculent as when we first saw him. We watched him well out of sight, then hurried down and out to our carriage and started for the sanatorium.

There was distinct disapproval in our driver's face as I gave him the order, and he answered me with a nod of surly contempt, which almost made me feel the rascal I was pretending to be. Nevertheless, he whipped up his horses, and we jogged on our way to the sanatorium with all the brisk abandon of a pauper funeral.

My ring was not answered for some time, and I think that we were well scrutinized before the door at length swung open, revealing to my thankful eyes, not the burly Mrs. Olsen, but a bearded and still more burly janitor.

"May I see Doctor Mayhew?" I asked.

The man grunted and ushered us into a comfortable little office at the head of the dark hall. There were a few minutes more of waiting, then Doctor Mayhew came briskly in, looking rosy and cheerfully professional.

"Well," he said, "what can I do for you?"

I glanced at Mrs. Lathrop, and with half an apology, stepped over and locked the door, and drew the doctor aside.

"Doctor Mayhew," I began, in the best manner I could muster, "you've been recommended to me by some friends of mine in New York. You'll forgive me if I mention no names. But you will recognize them, I am quite sure, when I tell you that you have under treatment an old gentleman who —"

Doctor Mayhew nodded.

"Quite so," he said, "quite so." Then bending to my ear, "Fulson?" he whispered.

In turn I nodded affirmation. "I have therefore," I continued, "brought my aunt to you for treatment,— my aunt, Mrs. Lathrop. Did I tell you that my name was John Lathrop?"

"What seems to be the trouble?" asked Doctor Mayhew, for all the world as if he really cared.

"She's been acting very strangely of late," I said; "very strangely."

"What should you say was the distinctive characteristic?"

I saw that Mrs. Lathrop was watching me and that she was quite well able to overhear our conversation. "She has been showing of late," I said maliciously, "an unaccountable desire to start on sudden journeys."

"Hum," said Doctor Mayhew reflectively.

"And," I continued, "a certain reckless disregard of money, which she seems perfectly willing to intrust to people that have really no claim on her. As her nearest relative and heir —"

"Mr. Lathrop, I quite understand," said Doctor Mayhew, and it was quite evident that he did. For at the word "money" his eyebrows had gone up, and whatever doubt I had read between his eyes disappeared at the magical sound. He felt himself at once on a firm footing.

While we were talking, Mrs. Lathrop had crept stealthily to the door, and now fumbled at the lock with a histrionic furtiveness that won my deepest admiration.

"Careful," I said.

Doctor Mayhew whirled at the word and, crossing the little office almost at a stride, dragged the reluctant Mrs. Lathrop back to her chair and put the key in his pocket; then, with a glance at me, he drew another chair in front of her, and sitting down, put her a few idiotically simple questions, none of which Mrs. Lathrop answered, save to moan in as many different keys, "I am not crazy," until I trembled between anxiety and almost irrepressible laughter.

Doctor Mayhew sighed. "Very sad case, sir," he said, turning to me, while Mrs. Lathrop threw me a kiss over his shoulder. "You have my deepest sympathy, sir. You say this poor lady has a great fortune?"

And following the silent motion of Mrs. Lathrop's lips:

"Only a million or so," I answered. Then as an afterthought, "Of course I have been unable, as yet, to determine its exact extent. As you are probably aware, this can not be done until she has been declared mentally incompetent, and I have been appointed her legal guardian."

Doctor Mayhew looked at me shrewdly.

"It will be a very difficult case," he said, "and I can not promise you that she will ever quite regain her faculties. For cases of this sort, needing such a variety of treatment, our uniform charge is six thousand dollars a year."

"Very well," I said, "you shall have the first month in advance to-morrow, by which time, I suppose, you will have the necessary papers made out."

"Yes," said the doctor, "and, by the way, no checks, please. Doctor Carleton, my colleague, has an aversion to checks, and we find that, in general, our clients themselves prefer currency."

"Very well," I agreed, as gravely as I could, for Mrs. Lathrop had suddenly straightened herself from an attitude of trance-like vacancy, and had started making a rabbit of her handkerchief. I was in terror as to the lengths to which her eager conscientiousness might carry her.

"Of course, you will give my aunt a good room and proper attendance," I said, "and if you will take a word of advice from me, Doctor, you will see that the maid who waits on her has dark hair. She has a particular aversion to blondes."

At this, Mrs. Lathrop clapped her hands in noiseless admiration; for, in spite of her pretended carelessness and really wonderful courage, I think that, at heart, the thought of the grim Mrs. Olsen troubled her.

"We have just the person," said Doctor Mayhew. "I am very glad that you brought the matter up. Five hundred dollars to-morrow, then, Mr. Lathrop."

"Yes," I said; "I am sorry I did not bring it with me."

Doctor Mayhew unlocked the door, and touched the bell for the janitor.

“ Let me know of Mr. Lathrop’s arrival to-morrow immediately,” he said. “ Come, Mrs. Lathrop, I want to show you a pretty room in this hotel.”

“ Boo,” said Mrs. Lathrop, and shot the rabbit into his face.

XXIII

A LETTER

WE had arranged that Mrs. Lathrop should let me know her room by raising and lowering her shade after dark, when I could watch the sanatorium without risk of discovery; and that I was to climb the ivy, as I had on the previous night, and hear her report of progress. It was the best plan that we had been able to devise and in practice I found it most unsatisfactory; the greatest objection being that I had to wait in idleness through all the daylight hours, and either keep to my room, or assume an almost impossible calm in public. After an hour or so, I chose my room and chose it thankfully.

It is a very easy thing to fight and a very difficult thing to wait for the battle. People in the hotel, I found, looked at me askance; my driver, who had driven out with two and come back with one, had probably spread the tidings of where the other had been left, so that I gradually found myself feeling like a scoundrel, after the need to pose as one had passed. Neither could I forget the mention of that "dark room," with which he of the brown derby had threatened Nancy. Mrs. Lathrop had promised to try to get some word to her, so that she might feign some thought of acquiescence, and put off further torture until the opportunity came to set her altogether beyond its reach. But in my loneliness I was filled with a growing dread that something might go wrong, that Mrs. Lathrop would not only be unable to send word to Nancy, but she herself might be recognized by Mrs. Olsen, and our whole scheme come tottering to earth. But, come what might, I determined grimly that neither Nancy nor Mrs. Lathrop should pass more than one more night there, if I had to fight the whole sanatorium force to get them out.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, just as I was planning to wear the edge from my nervousness by a long walk in the country, a knock came at my door, and I opened it to admit a frowsy, barefooted urchin, who stared at me a long time curiously, and then asked me my name.

"John Lathrop," he repeated; "that's right; that's the right name," and he dragged out of his pocket a bulky envelope, almost as frowsy as himself. "My sister give me this," he said, "and said to hand it to you, but she didn't pay me nothin' for bringing it."

I sent him away gaping round-eyed at a new dollar bill, and locking the door, tore open the envelope with trembling fingers. It was written in a fine, formal, little, old-fashioned hand, and I needed no glance at the signature to know that it was from Mrs. Lathrop. She had dated it irrepressibly " The Fake Loony-house, May 12th and all well."

" MY SCOUNDRELLY BUT DEAR NEPHEW:

" In the first place, everything is going to come out all right. In the second place, you're a pretty poor actor but a little better than I expected. In the third place, I would have been having the most beautiful time of my life, if I weren't so sorry for all the other people here. When you had gone, that pink young Doctor Mayhew led me up-stairs to see the 'pretty room' he spoke of, and when we got there, he just opened the door, gave me a shove in, and turned the lock on the outside. If he'd had his first month's instalment, I guess he would have kicked me in, and I love to think of what is going to happen to him some day. Just the same, I was pretty glad to get to my room; for all the way through those long halls, my knees were knocking together for fear we'd meet that blonde nurse, you said so truly, and with such presence of mind, that I did not like. And, till my own maid came, I kept on being pretty scared; for, of course, I knew that the doctor's promises did not mean much of anything, and that he was just as apt to send in Mrs. Olsen if she came handy.

"Don't be afraid I am writing you too much, for I have a nice, new bottle of ink and a whole box of paper.

"Well, pretty soon the door opened, and my maid did come in. She is a nice-looking, thinnish girl of about thirty, I should say, and she was real kind to me even before I spoke of money. I kept her talking as long as I could, and worked around to our plan gradually. First, I offered her fifty dollars for getting this note out of the hospital and things to write it with. She laughed, at first, and I guess she didn't think I had the money; but when I counted ten fives off that big roll, she stopped laughing and took them quick enough.

"It's a mystery to me, Nephew John, what queer people go to make up a world. Here was a young woman with a good heart and pretty tender feelings, who just because she needed money for somebody else, was willing to do almost anything to get it. I've had a long talk with her, and I find her hard to understand. She was born near this place and knew all about it, yet, knowing what she did, she came here to work. She couldn't make enough money anywhere else, she said. She has four or five little brothers and sisters and the regular useless mother and father, so that I suppose there is some excuse for her. Yet it does seem queer that such a nice girl should be in such a business. It was she, John, who mailed you another letter you know of, and she did that, not for money, but for love; for, from all I could find out, she just about worships your Nancy. When I told her why I was there and what we were going to do, she took the rest of the money, to be sure, because she said she needed it and stood a pretty good chance of losing her position, but she is as enthusiastic as can be about the work I have set her to do. I think that perhaps she might have done it for nothing, but I did not quite have the heart to ask her, nor did I quite dare to run the risk. She loves your young lady, but, after all, she loves money first; and when we give her a chance to follow her own inclination, and at the same time get paid for it, I think that we may be pretty sure that she will do her work well.

"Of course the first thing I did was to send her in to Nancy, to tell her I was here and that we were going to get her away as soon as possible, so that she was not on any account to let that 'Doctor Morrison' get mad enough to put her in the 'dark room.' Then I arranged the rest of the plan with her, the nurse, I mean.

"There isn't any use at all, as far as I can see, of either of us poor women staying here, while you batten at the hotel. To-night seems to me as good a time as any. There's only just one trouble, and that is — that this maid or nurse of ours, or whatever you want to call her, has no business on our floor at ten o'clock, so that she is afraid to come up and let us out. After nine her work is all down-stairs, where, I believe, she does some clerking for the doctors; and she is afraid that if she is gone long enough to come up and unlock our doors, one of the doctors would miss her — even if she did not happen to run into Mrs. Olsen. She says the best she can do is to unlock the front door, because it would only take her a minute to slip out of the office and do that; but I told her that was all right and that that would do finely. You see, you are going to have some hard work after all.

"We are arranging for as late as ten o'clock, because, of course, it has to be after dark, and Doctor Morrison comes in the evening, and we can't be sure of his going away before then.

"So, Nephew John, if you love us (and I am sure that you do), like the hero of the old romances, you are to be at the door as the clock strikes ten. Be careful to be exact about the time, for the door will be unlocked then, and every minute that it remains unlocked will add to the danger of suspicion or discovery. Our little mercenary is going to set her watch by the six o'clock whistle this evening, and you had better do the same, so that the two time-pieces may tick as one.

"The hardest thing you will have to do, once you are inside, is to get past the office, which, as you know, opens on to the hall, almost directly at its entrance. She is going to try to close the office door, if she can, but she is not sure that she can do it; for it is usually left open, and any little variants from custom excite suspicion in a place where people have long grown into the habit of looking over their shoulders. Nevertheless, even if the office door is open, I am sure you will manage to get past; and once past, save for a chance encounter, the rest will be pretty plain sailing. My room is on the second floor, as is Nancy's, and is two doors from the head of the stairs and four from hers, which is, as you know, at the end of the corridor. You go right down and get her first, and you both can stop for me on the way back.

"If you should run into that Mrs. Olsen, you had better just choke her, for she isn't worth saving. Of course, you know, I don't want you to kill her; only you should take precautions against her screaming, and it wouldn't hurt any if you put some margins on them. It won't be much loss to the world if she isn't able to lie for two or three days. Seriously, we must do something about this place when we are all well away from here. I was having a very good time, as you saw, when I came in, and I thought that we were very clever, and that, for once, I was having an adventure worth the having, but the woman in the room next to mine has been sobbing all the morning, and the fun has worn off things. I have always had my doubts about an actual hell, but I shan't have any more. There must be some place further on, where devils who make hells on earth can come into their own at last.

"Don't kill anybody, John, but don't be afraid of hurting anybody that tries to stop you; whatever you do to them won't be half what they deserve.

"I remain, ever your affectionate
"AUNT SALLY."

XXIV

THE ATTEMPT

I MADE but few preparations. First of all, I looked up the telegraph office and telegraphed my friend the hotel clerk to mail me the rest of my money, so that I could get it the next day at my present lodgings. Then I wrote a long letter to Mr. Ogilby; and, last of all, I bought a little pot of phosphorus from the local chemist, with which I smeared the face of the cheap watch I had bought to replace the one taken from me in the park. It stained the white cardboard face badly; but I left it in the sun for an hour, and was pretty sure it would glow sufficiently after real darkness had come to show me the time. About twilight I started for the sanatorium.

This time I left the road as soon as the sanatorium was in sight, and, making a long circle across the fields, came to my former hiding-place in such a way that I was pretty sure that I was not seen. As I settled myself down to wait I saw a dim face in the window I took to be Mrs. Lathrop's, and could scarcely forbear making some sort of signal to her; for in the gathering dusk the hideous old building seemed more forbidding than ever, and Mrs. Lathrop's courage and unselfishness came over me in new realization. I would have given a good deal to have told her that I was there, to have lent some reassurance and relieve in a measure the anxiety, that I now realized for the first time, she could not help but feel. But, of course, I dared make no sign, and only crouched the closer in my ambush.

It was getting very dark indeed, and already one or two windows had been lighted and the curtains drawn, and I was watching for a flash in the corner room that might give me a glimpse of Nancy, when some slight sound or prescience made me turn my head. I looked up to see the dim figure of a man, a figure that had already left the road, and that was making steadily and stealthily for the clump of bushes behind which I lay concealed. Naturally my first thought was that I had been seen, and that this was one of the watchmen who came to put the matter beyond any further doubt by investigating my hiding-place.

Still crouching, I got my feet under me, that I might be ready for whatever should chance. Perhaps, after all, this was not the watchman but some farmer taking a familiar cut across lots, or a tramp in search of a comfortable hay-mow; so that as he came nearer, I moved slightly so as to keep the clump of bushes between us. To my surprise the man came directly to the spot where I had lain, and without further search settled himself in the hollow of crushed grass that must still have been warm from my body. Either he was not the watchman or, if he was, he had discovered me, or some signs of me, on the night before, and now was waiting until I should come. I flattened myself down on my side of the bushes, for I heard a twig snap under his hand, and saw the branches stir. This man, too, was watching either the road or the sanatorium.

It is a strange thing to lie in the dark within a few feet of another human being, who does not realize your presence, a being whose every thought is, for all you know, to await your coming and do you injury. Strange little pricking fires ran over me, wave after wave, and my tense muscles twitched, as I have seen the muscles of a dog as he stood tense at some unknown sound; and I found that, although I was not afraid, I was fiercely angry with a sort of primal apprehension, astir with a fierce lust of encounter, utterly primitive, the sheer immutable heritage of jungle-cradled man. I was holding my arm over my face, partly that no light or shade might show against the gathering gloom, and partly that no sound of my breathing might come to the other watcher's ears; for to mine each uncertain catch of his breath came plainly; when I heard a little sound which startled me more than could have any thunder-clap, a sound that I knew well, half muffled yet sweetly clear, the well-known chiming of my own repeater watch. Without more ado I crept around the bush and put my hand over the mouth of the Reverend Mr. Stevens.

He did not give up without a struggle. His body stiffened under my grip like an animal's, and he drove one elbow back against me, while I felt the sharp touch of his teeth on the hand that held his mouth; so that I laughed softly with the joy of it, and pulled him over on his back.

"You had better lie still," I whispered, "and show a little Christian humility. I don't want to choke you unless I have to."

I saw the white of his eyes glimmer up at me in the darkness; but he gave a sudden squirm almost out of my grasp, and kicked viciously at me.

"All right," I said, and gave his lean throat a little pinch, so that he sobbed and lay still. I gagged him with his own handkerchief, and then holding both bony wrists in one hand, I searched his pockets until I found my watch.

It was now quite dark so that I moved without fear of being seen, remembering only to move in silence. Why Stevens had come I could not guess. It was enough for the moment that he was here and must be reckoned with. Glad as I was to see him, he must not interfere with the real work I had in hand. So, for a while, I sat holding him and listening to the irregular whistle of his returning breath, casting about in my mind for some means of leaving him safely behind me. I had nothing in my own pockets to tie him with except my handkerchief, and this I used to bind his gag more firmly in place. At last, with infinite satisfaction, I set deliberately to work. First of all, I stripped him of his coat, and when I had transferred the contents of his pockets to my own, I tore out the lining and twisted it into a very serviceable rope to bind about his knees and ankles. His tie, I found, although a very ugly one as I remembered it, was finely suited to my needs; for it was strong and long and thick, so that when I had turned him on his face and brought his hands together behind him, I found it exactly suited for tying them together. The lining of the sleeves furnished me with cord enough to draw up his feet until they almost touched his hands, where I tied them together, and left him trussed like some lean and contorted razor-back swine. It was not, perhaps, a very comfortable position in which to leave the minister who had married me; but the night was warm, and to my thinking, Mr. Stevens did not merit much consideration. And I reflected that it would be easy enough next day to send somebody word to release him.

My own repeater ticked delicately in my pocket with a steady, courtly little sound, perfectly distinct and rhythmical through the louder and coarser pulsation of its cheap plebeian substitute, and when I pressed its spring, told me merrily that it was nearly nine o'clock, news which I verified by a glance at the dim, phosphorescent face of the other. And I sat by the human bundle I had made, at peace and almost happy. For all of my tenseness had disappeared, all that before-struggle feeling of interminable time: in their place reigned the joyous and confident calm of combat. I did not even care that I had still more than an hour to wait, and, although I had missed my glimpse of Nancy (for now her light was lit and the shade drawn), yet I felt that I could afford to wait, serenely certain that in a little over an hour I would take her in my arms again. There is something intoxicating in even the smallest success, the very fact of winning seems to make the ultimate and completer triumph an easy and foregone conclusion. I even made some shift to make my prisoner comfortable, although of course I did not loose his bonds. At ten minutes of ten I left him in undisputed possession of the place he had chosen, and began to make my way carefully toward the door of the sanatorium. The watchman should just have gone by, so my only thought was to avoid observation by the man on the roof, an observation which the heavy darkness made practically impossible.

I felt along the ivied wall until I came to the low steps which led up to the great door, and then shrank back into the ivy to wait and listen. I did not dare, now, to press the spring of my repeater, but I guardedly took the other watch from my pocket and, cradling it in my hands, saw that it was two minutes of ten. In a moment more I thanked God in the darkness; for I heard the soft shriek and click of the big lock almost at my ear.

I climbed the steps very cautiously, and for a moment stood at the door listening. Then, with infinite care, I softly and slowly turned the knob, and pushed the door open an inch or so. I could hear a murmur of voices that was almost articulate, and surmised that our mercenary had been unable to close the door of the office. Nevertheless, although it was not now or never, at least it was now. I pushed the door still farther open, just far enough to admit my body, and, slipping in, softly closed it behind me.

To my satisfaction I found the hall but dimly lighted, so that the brightness from the office door at my left hand made a broad, truncated V on the worn boards of the hall floor, a space of light not four feet away from me, through which I must pass into the safer dimness on its farther side. I could now hear plainly Doctor Mayhew's voice, dictating what I suppose was some rascally letter or other, and I drew back into the corner at the right of the great door in the hope that, leaning forward, I might be able to see him. As I did so his shadow passed before me on the floor. Evidently he was pacing up and down as he wrote. I watched the grotesque shadow pass four or five times, a shadow whose striding, giant legs commenced somewhere in the office, fell flatly across the floor and, bending at the wall like some huge, black, paper doll, staggered in vague, flat bulk almost to the ceiling. Although the intervals of its passing and repassing were short they were at least regular, and when I judged that Doctor Mayhew was just approaching the farther wall and had his back turned toward me, I crossed the strip of light in two long tiptoeing strides, and, veering across to the wall on my left, stole softly along it, until almost at its end it was cut at right angles by another hall. At this corner I stopped again and listened.

My straining ears were still able to catch the distant murmur of Doctor Mayhew's dictation. Once, as I listened, something seemed to fall in a distant room. Save for these sounds, the place was in silence. I turned the corner and found the newel post of the stairs, a carved and dilapidated griffin, whose stately and menacing dignity had been much marred by the loss of an ear. I was foolish enough to pat him on the head, as a school-boy might have, as I started to climb the stairs.

If these stairs had been built for the purpose of giving alarm they could scarcely have been better contrived. The first one groaned beneath my feet, and the second, to which I hastily transferred my weight, gave a shriek of protest that seemed to my strained senses almost human. I tried the expedient of testing each one of them with my hand, but even those that I so proved silent, yelled betrayal as soon as I trusted the full weight of my body to them. Indeed, I think every stair of the flight was potentially vocal, and differed from its fellows only in the key and volume of its protest. A skilful and acrobatic musician could, I think, have trampled a dirge from them. After I had tried four or five in momentary apprehension of discovery, I cast myself astride the balustrade, thinking to work my way up it hand over hand; but the balustrade was the prima donna of the whole chorus, and bawled out such a shrilling vibration of protest that I slid back to the stairs again, and without more ado, and taking three at a stride, mounted them on the run.

At the top I stopped again and listened, feeling very much as a burglar might, who had undeftly dislodged a stack of tin pie plates; for I was certain that by now the whole house must be alarmed, that in another moment Doctor Mayhew and his janitor must rush from below, and some unknown guard of the floor where I now stood come at me from the other side. But nothing at all happened. Some one in one of the closed rooms had a fit of coughing, and brought it to a loud and successful conclusion. Below me the dim well of the hall lay in silent mystery, like waters that had parted to let me through and closed again after my passage. I stole along again, counting the doors as I passed. At the one I knew to be Mrs. Lathrop's I stopped and listened, but there was no sound. I debated for a moment whether or not I should tap and whisper "all well" to her, but I decided against it and went tiptoeing on. I had come to the next door when there came a rattle of the latch at the farther end of the hall; the door I took to be Nancy's opened and into the sudden brightness stepped the square figure of Mrs. Olsen.

I shrank instinctively against the door at my side, and, because I was sure that in spite of the dimness of the hall she must have seen me, I abandoned my foolish attempt at concealment and risked a very doubtful strategy. It was a dubious experiment, but, as far as I could see, the only one left open to me. Mrs. Olsen was still too far away to take by surprise, or by any sudden move of mine be prevented from giving the alarm; so, there being nothing else for it, I tried to impersonate Doctor Mayhew, although I knew myself so much larger than he that I was desperately uncertain of success. Nevertheless, I stooped to the bolt as nonchalantly as I could, and shooting it carelessly back, turned the handle and stepped quietly into the room, closing the door behind me. I found the room in the half-light of a turned-down lamp, and from a huddle of bed clothes a face turned and looked at me, the weary face of the old man I had seen from my place amidst the ivy, a startled old face now, with frightened eyes that looked at me piteously, as if my unexpected entrance was only some new and untimed terror. I nodded and smiled at him reassuringly.

"It's all right," I said gently; "I'm not one of the doctors or anything like that. You can set your mind at rest. I'm only some one who has come to find out about this place. Perhaps — who knows — perhaps I can even send you home again some day."

"Home," the old fellow quavered, looking at me uncomprehendingly, "home?"

"Yes," I repeated, "perhaps I can send you home."

He passed his hand over the gray stubble of lip and chin, and brushed the straggle of thin hair back from his forehead.

"Home," he repeated, with some dawning of comprehension, and to my surprise and embarrassment, sat bolt upright in bed and burst into tears.

I thought, through his sobbing, I could hear steps passing in the hall outside. I stepped back to the door and listened, and it seemed to me the footsteps were dying away in the direction of the stairs; so that I was on fire to open the door again, certain that the coast was now clear, and wild to be with Nancy. But for the life of me, I could not so abruptly leave that sobbing old creature on the huddled bed. It was insane to wait, and all my inclination and hope and love and fear drew me away, but against my will I came back to his bed again, and put my arm about his shoulders.

"Listen," I said; "you must be very quiet, for no one must find out that I have been here. Perhaps you won't understand now, but you can think of it when I am gone. I haven't time to tell you much, but I promise you that I am going to try to help not only you, but all the people here. I may be able to do it to-morrow; perhaps it will be some days, or even some weeks, but you must remember that everything is going to be all right, that the days of this place have come to an end, and that you are going to be free again. This is a secret between us, and a secret that you must keep. You must believe it, for it is true. Good night."

As I talked, the poor old fellow had stopped crying, and I did not wait even to see if he understood me, but opened the door again and, seeing that the hall was empty, stepped out and shot the bolt behind me, and ran on tiptoes to the door of Nancy's room.

"Nancy," I called in a whisper, "Nancy!" and tapped gently on the panel.

No one answered me, and although I knew that this might mean that Mrs. Olsen was still in the room, there was no going back now, nor did I wish for any. If there was to be a fight I should welcome it; only now I must have Nancy behind me. I undid the lock and stepped into the room, shutting the door to find myself in absolute darkness.

"Nancy," I whispered again, and again I got no answer.

I felt for my matches with shaking fingers, broke the first, and in the brilliant flare of the next saw that I was all alone. Either I had mistaken the room, or Nancy had been moved.

The match burned to my fingers and went out, so that I groped for the door in the darkness. As my hand fell on the knob, there came a heavy rush of feet along the hall, and as I stood tensely waiting for the door to open, I heard the sudden rattle of the bolt as it was shot into its place.

XXV

THE ENCOUNTER

WITH the surprise, a wave of sheer and utter disgust swept over me. I had come very sure of myself, quite certain that before an hour had passed I should have Nancy free again, and that she and Mrs. Lathrop and I would be well on our way back toward the village. I meant to do all this, as I have said, by stealth; but I had quite realized the possibility, or even probability, of some sharp personal encounter, and in my heart of hearts I had secretly looked forward to it. But suddenly to find myself trapped and bolted in had not for a moment entered into my reckoning. I had been caught and locked up like a school-boy, and for a while a sickening sense of humiliation triumphed even over my anger, a sense that sapped at my strength like a very fever. Even now I hate to recall the moment, to bring back again to memory the petulant and weakened force with which I put my shoulder to the door, only to hear a little groan of its double bolted oak, and the rough-voiced, unfeminine giggle that answered my effort from the other side.

I tried the door again and again without success, but whether it was indeed beyond my strength, still languorous with disgrace, I do not know. But, at any rate, although I made the oak cry aloud and again, bolt and panel still held and all I got for my effort was a bruised shoulder.

Nor, when I had tried the window, did I have any better success with the bars. I could bend them a little, to be sure, bend them with what seemed to me a great effort, about as much as they had moved under my hand from my insecure purchase among the ivy the night before. So that it almost seemed to me that the bars must have been changed, that my coming had been planned for and expected; and I sickened still more at the thought. So certain did this idea become to me, that I took no comfort from the fact that these bars, too, were rusty, that their heavy surfaces were so channeled and scarred by corrosion, that my gloves, and even the palms of my hands, were cut and torn. Because now I could not tear them away I felt that they were other than those which I had bent so easily the evening before, which certainty added by implication the certainty that I had fallen into a well-laid trap. I felt that when I at last found Nancy again I could scarcely look her in the eyes, but must stand with bowed head before her like some birched booby.

After an eternity of this sort of thing I felt in my pocket for my matches, only to find that I had lost them. Sullenly I thought back until I remembered. I had struck one match when I first found the room in darkness, but, in my surprise at the barrenness its flare revealed, I must have dropped the box which held the others. So now I went down on my hands and knees, and becoming the creeping thing I already felt myself, fumbled the floor in search of them. At last near the door I recovered them, and by the light of the first one found the fixture and lit the jet.

This really was the room which had been Nancy's. That my first glance in the jumping, flickering light showed me. Every trace of her occupancy had gone, except the great chair with its tattered covering, which had distinguished her room from the others. But even in my groping in the dark I had known it to be Nancy's room. Humanity, in spite of the materialists, is a strangely spiritual thing, which leaves, even in passing, a certain invisible radiance, an intangible, nebulous train of personal aura, faint and mystical, but still softly vibrant and perceptible, at least to one other human being, whose receptive senses are attuned by love. To limit mankind to five senses is as obviously superficial as are most of the dogmatic dictums of science. I really knew before I lit my first match that Nancy was gone, and as certainly I knew now that this had once been her room.

For a while I was so selfishly absorbed in the thought of my coming shame when I should find her, that even my curiosity was deadened; but with the bare little room so lately hers, and now so plainly before me in the jumping gas light, I began to wonder, at first in a faint, subconscious sort of way and then with a sudden leaping apprehension, where they had taken her. I suppose that I had felt, even without a full realization, that she was only somewhere else in the building, that in moving her from this room, they had simply put her in another; and that, once I was out, I should find her wherever she was. But now as my vague disquietude took a more concrete form and sprang in a moment from numb speculation to positive dread, the thought of that menacing figure of the man in the brown derby came before me, and I found myself standing stark afraid, cold with dread and a consuming, murderous rage; for, of a sudden, I had remembered the "dark room."

It was at this moment that the door swung open, and the man in all the world whom I most desired to see stepped in. I had not heard the bolts undone, but now I heard them slip softly into place behind him.

I think he had meant to meet me with some mocking commonplace, but he must have seen the murder in my eyes, and like a wise man determined to bide his time; for almost as the door shut I found myself looking into the mouth of a revolver.

"Sit down," said Doctor Morrison, very quietly.

Very reluctantly I turned and took the great, tattered chair which had once been Nancy's. I wished with all my heart to remain on my feet; for standing, I could better watch my opportunity, and when it came, take advantage of it. But this was probably the reason he desired me sitting, and it was perfectly evident that he wished nothing better than some excuse for pulling the trigger. When I was once seated, however, he began to laugh.

"Your particular form of insanity," he began, "interests me extremely. I assure you that we have very few patients who come here of their own accord. In fact, in all the time that I have been connected with this institution, I do not remember any one, who realized that he must stay here for life, voluntarily seeking such a lengthy course of treatment and confinement."

"Where have you put her?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "this is another peculiar feature of the case, one of the rarest coincidences, in my judgment, in all psychopathic history. You doubtless believe, and I suppose will calmly assert, that you were married a short time ago, and that some one has taken your wife away from you. You will say your name is Ellsworth, and that you were married to a Miss —— what's her name? — Bond, I believe, is the name. That wouldn't be so funny, except for the coincidence; and that, to my mind, is screamingly humorous. You may not believe it, — but, I forget, that, of course, is exactly what you *do* believe — but we have a young lady here whose name really *is* Bond, whose peculiar form of hallucination is much like yours; that she was married a short time ago (and this will amuse even you, incredible as it may seem), to a man named Ellsworth. I really must write a paper about it. Of course the thing may be simply a coincidence, and yet I can not believe but that I have discovered a new form of hallucination, which I propose to call 'telepathic insanity.'"

I watched him very carefully as he spoke. He was evidently much pleased with himself, and the cold, close-set eyes almost sparkled with pleasure. Once or twice he even waved the revolver in a sort of explanatory gesture, a gesture which I soon hoped to make him repeat. I saw him at close quarters, a man almost as tall as I am, whose thick, sloping shoulders, long arms, and broad, muscular hands promised a strength beyond the ordinary,— a strength, which, if he would only wave the revolver a little farther to one side, I might test without too much risk of leaving Nancy without a protector.

"Do you propose to keep me here indefinitely?" I asked, more for the sake of saying something than from any curiosity as to his answer.

Doctor Morrison smiled. "I really can not say," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders; "that will be a matter for the other doctors to decide at some future time. Perhaps in a few years they might manage to effect your cure and so release you. Personally I am severing my connection with the institution. I may be overstepping ethical boundaries in making this confession to a patient, but great good fortune makes fools of us all. I am going to be married, Mr. Ellsworth."

"Might I inquire," I asked, "if your plans include bigamy?"

"Now, Mr. Ellsworth, now, now. Pray be calm. The more you try to master that hallucination of yours, the nearer you are to a cure. I am going to marry Miss Bond, an old patient of mine who is almost cured."

The revolver waved so far this time that my muscles tautened for a spring.

"Cured?" I repeated.

"Yes; we have great hopes of our new treatment. We have her —"

"Yes," I prompted, "you have her —"

"Perhaps I had better not tell you," said Doctor Morrison.

"Just as you like," I said, as indifferently as I could, lowering my eyes that he might not see the sudden murder in them.

"Well, you'd better hear after all," said Doctor

Morrison. "Just before you dropped in here, we thought it best to remove her to the dark room."

"Where?" I managed to say.

"The dark room," answered Doctor Morrison, and pointed indefinitely down and to the right with the hand that held the revolver, so that, as I came up and struck him in the face, his first bullet went behind me into the floor. But, with my spring, I had misjudged distance a little, and although I had hit him hard, the blow had come too low, striking his chest and only glancing against his chin, so that he staggered back and would have raised the revolver had I not grasped his wrist. Even then he cursed me heartily, and, I think, had no doubt of his ability to wrest himself free in a moment or so; and indeed, at his first sudden wrench almost succeeded. But I managed somehow to hold on, and struck at him again with my free right hand. This time he lowered his head to the blow, so that instead of striking him on the chin, as I had wished, my clenched fist drove squarely against the top of his skull; and though I struck from very short range, I hit him with enough force, I think, to surprise both of us, for he grunted aloud, and seemed for a second to settle a little, with a queer giving of all his muscles, as I have seen a steer settle when struck by the slaughtering hammer. But his skull was thick and he did not fall; and my own injury was, perhaps, as great as his. I thought dimly that I had broken some bone in my hand, and noticed, in a detached sort of way, that my glove had split from finger-crotch to wrist, so that the back of my hand showed through like a livid gash. Then, like a flash, he had closed with me, his left arm clapped about my back and his leg locked behind mine in the simple, old wrestling trick perfectly familiar to boys the world over. I knew it too well to be much afraid of it, and only straightened and stiffened against it, working my right arm up until it was between us, until I got my hand fairly under his chin, pushing his head up and backward.

When a man is fighting for other lives than his own, he fights not by any particular code, except that the instinct of tradition forbids him to use his teeth; but fights, as best he may, to win, using whatever means present the most potent possibilities. I hoped, once I had pushed his head backward far enough, to strike him across the throat with the edge of my hand, a short, chopping stroke, that was the only thing I recalled of forgotten lessons in jiu jitsu; but Morrison suddenly let go and the very pressure of my hand upon his chin sent him backward and away from me out of immediate striking distance, so that the arms which struggled for the revolver were stretched like a rope between us. But now there was no longer any question of his being able to wrench himself away, for with the seconds of fighting my strength was coming back to me again, and the power which I had never used but once before began to glow through me like old brandy.

I do not mean that I was certain of him, but only certain that he could not wrench his hand away. For the great, sloping shoulders had not belied the man. He was stronger than any one I had ever met, and now, as for the moment we looked in each other's eyes, as he saw in mine I know not what joy of battle or leaping lust of longed-for vengeance, and as I saw his face grow stern and set with realization, grow white and tight-lipped as the face of a man who finds himself, in a moment, breast to breast with death, I knew that I must fight warily and well. I tightened still more the hand that grasped his wrist, and still looking at him, bent it slowly over, hoping by the agony of the twist to loosen the fingers that clenched the revolver butt. I saw the pain in his face; and then the most dreadful and fearful thing a man can see, utter and absolute fear, the mad terror that is more dangerous than sheer courage, the maniac strength of the basic and ultimate coward.

I threw my arm before my face instinctively as he leaped at me, jerking and holding him away as best I could with the other, so that his teeth snapped like a dog's but a few inches from my face. Though for a full minute I held him struggling in the middle of the floor, tearing at me with his free hand, striking with his lowered head, kicking, scratching and biting, a great and horrible thing, a man fallen suddenly brute with all a brute's vicious, unreasoning strength, yet, by what grace I do not know, I escaped unhurt; and as his strength began to lessen, I pushed him back and back, until I had him fair against the wall of the room, with the open bars behind him, where I rested for a moment, panting. Then I pushed his hand backward and up until the steel of his weapon rattled and grated against the blind bars of the window, the revolver fell at last from his fingers, striking the sill as it fell and dropping out into the darkness.

I flung aside his hand, then, and stepped back a pace or so, for I was still foolish enough to want to fight him fairly. But when he had a little recovered himself, I saw his eyes flicker to the door which had been bolted behind him until they reached the electric push-button, which he had evidently meant to ring when he wished the door again unbolted; and, though it had been only a glance, I knew as well as if he had shouted it aloud that he had had enough of fighting, and that his only thought was to get to that bell. Nevertheless, I stood where I was and watched quietly, getting my breath again and gathering myself together to meet any move that he might make. But when that move came, it was not directly toward the door, as I had expected, but suddenly and obliquely toward the little iron wash-stand in the corner. His hand was fairly on the tin pitcher before I reached him and struck him with all my strength.

He threw up one arm in some kind of guard, while his other hand, now grasping the handle of the pitcher, jerked it toward me, splashing a little cascade of water on to the bare boards of the floor. But though the blow spent some of its force upon his arm, yet it staggered him and carried him back, so that, as I followed it with my other hand, I caught him this time unguarded, full and fair on the point of the chin, shaking his head upon his shoulders. His arms jerked up convulsively and fell; and he crashed back into the wall behind him; tottered, crumpled and fell sprawling to the floor on his face. The heavy tin pitcher clattered by his side and drenched him with water, but he did not move; and I turned him over on his back.

I examined him rapidly, and breathed a sigh of relief to find his heart still beating. I had struck him coldly enough, and as I struck had not thought or cared whether or not the blow would kill him; but now, as I bent over him, I found myself glad that, in spite of his cruelty and his wickedness, I had not killed the man. But I was almost equally glad that I had put him, for a while, beyond doing mischief.

I straightened up and looked about the room. Spilled water was running across the dusty floor in little, mercury-like rivulets, that rushed roundly and erratically forward for a few, narrow-tongued inches, stopped apparently causelessly, and as causelessly shot on a little way again. The air was so full of dust that it set me coughing. But, save for the dust and the spilled water and the great, inert figure on the floor, the room was just as it had been, the door was still bolted on the outside, and I was still a prisoner.

There was, however, another difference. I was still fast bolted in, but now I knew that the bolts could not hold me, that I was as strong now as I had been weak before, and that four-inch bits of steel and thumb-thick panels of oak could no longer block my way to Nancy.

I wondered that the revolver shot and the uproar of our struggle had not brought some one already, and, indeed, as I had fought, I had momentarily expected to hear the click of bolts and the opening of the door behind me. So now, before I put my shoulder to it, I paused and listened, my ear close to the open panel. Some one was undoubtedly in the hall outside, two, or perhaps three, people; for I was sure that I distinguished Mrs. Olsen's voice, and thought that it was Doctor Mayhew who answered her.

"We had better go in," I heard him say.

"But," protested Mrs. Olsen, if it were she, "he said that he was not to be disturbed."

"You say —" Doctor Mayhew's voice faltered, "that you heard a — a shot? That — that would be going pretty far, Mrs. Olsen. Even we can't have that sort of thing."

"It's probably in self-defense."

"But," Doctor Mayhew said plaintively, "you can't shoot patients in an asylum even in self-defense. He ought to have taken Mat in with him. Mrs. Olsen, I don't like it. I'm going in, whether or no."

"And be a witness?" she asked dryly.

I did not wait for any more. They certainly were not going to wait much longer, and there might be three or four in the party, a risk which I did not want to run. So I faced about to the window again, thinking, once I had torn the bars away and dropped down outside, to come in again at some lower window. But to my joy I saw something that until now had in some way entirely escaped my observation. A smaller door, much like the one I had left, led into an adjoining room.

Time was precious now, I felt, and I put my shoulder to it and heaved with all my might, so that the oak panel cracked and split, and I could hear the lock groan. With another heave it flew open before me; and I stumbled into a room, lighted like my own, turned around and shut the door, and saw lying before it and almost at my feet a little, huddled-up man who had evidently been listening to the strange sounds on the other side. I paid no attention to him, but strode across the room and dragged back his iron bed to prop against the door, as some makeshift for its broken lock. I put him aside as gently as I could to do this, and he turned a frightened face toward me, hiding a wobbling, rabbit-like chin with trembling fingers. I straightened up in amazement, for I was looking into the shifting eyes of Ephraim Bond.

XXVI

THE DARK ROOM

HIS surprise was, I think, quite as great as my own. He looked at me for a moment, soft jaw fallen, round mouth agape; and as he looked his shifty eyes began to snap with a sort of petulant fury, and he rose to his feet with a little stamp that reminded me all the more of a rabbit.

"You?" he said, "you?" and he pointed at me a hand which shook with the raging tempest of his sudden anger. "You?" he repeated again at last, as if the word was an execration and the top limit of his vocabulary.

"Yes," I answered, a little flippantly, for I felt giddy and drunk with fighting, "it is I, Mr. Bond. May I ask what you are doing here? Or rather, I don't care to ask, or waste time in listening to your answer. I can guess well enough why you are here. I will trouble you to open that door now; for I have some work to do, and perhaps you had better come along and explain things to Doctor Mayhew."

He cowered and winced as my hand fell on his arm, but, with a rising anger, fairly mowed at me.

"Open the door?" he shrieked; "how should I open the door? I promise you, Mason Ellsworth, I'll have the law on you for this. Oh, you're clever, very clever, indeed. Don't make a mock of me too soon. You'll find yourself in prison one of these days, sir."

"May I ask what on earth you are talking about?" I said.

Ephraim Bond's fluttering rage seemed gone in a moment. He looked again, all in a flash, the soft-mannered, trembling-chinned old man I had first met in the Lexington Avenue stable. Tears of self-pity began to well into his eyes and flow weakly down his cheeks, till he snuffled and rubbed his soft nose.

"What wrong have I done you, Mr. Ellsworth?" he asked, with a little sobbing catch in his voice. "Aren't you satisfied? What has she told you?"

"She told me enough to make me want to throttle you," I answered, "but that can wait."

"If more money is all you want," he interrupted, "you can have that, and plenty. I mean to be fair to everybody."

"Come," I said; "enough of this. Hurry, and let me out, and show me where you have put her."

"Where —" A very real amazement made the wobbling chin drop again. "Do you really mean to say, Mr. Ellsworth, that you did not do it?"

"Do what?" I answered angrily. "If you mean, did I break your agent's jaw in the next room there, I hope I did. Come now; the door."

Mr. Bond spread out his hands in a wide gesture. "Can't you see, young man," he asked, "that I am a prisoner here myself?"

"You?" I exclaimed.

The anger was coming back into his face again. "Yes," he said, "a prisoner, a prisoner! Trapped here and illegally detained. I have thought, sir, that this was some revenge of yours; but if you did not do it — and I see that you did not — my wrong is greater than I had supposed. I thought I heard his voice, but I could not believe it. Oh, this is terrible, terrible! Mr. Ellsworth, you must leave me. I must have time to think,— to think."

"Leave you!" I said; "I am as trapped as you are. Hush! they are opening the door in the next room."

The door had certainly been opened. I heard a little shriek from Mrs. Olsen, and a rapped-out oath from Doctor Mayhew. Decidedly it was time to be about my business.

"Mr. Bond, I think we can help each other," I whispered.

But Mr. Bond had sunk down on the bed which stood pushed against the door, and sat with his face buried in his hands, whimpering and shaking like some foolish little animal.

I shook him by the shoulder.

"Come," I said, "you can have your cry later. Just now, we've got to get out."

"To have done this!" said Mr. Bond.

"If you're talking about that fellow in the brown derby," I said, "we're almost square with him now. Come, Mr. Bond, they will be in here in a minute, and I want you to help me." I stood him on his feet and pulled his hands from his stricken face. "Listen," I said. "I am going to shake the door into the hall, and when I stop, I want you to commence. Make as much noise as you can. Kick it, if you have to. You understand?"

He looked at me blankly, and I repeated my instructions all over again, prefacing them with a threat of immediate violence to stir him into comprehension. This time he nodded.

A hand cautiously pushed at the broken door behind me.

"Quick," I said. "Push against the bed as hard as you can, and then come over to the other door as soon as I am through."

I really had no time to think much about Mr. Bond, to care what his distress was or how he got there. My whole thought was now to get out of that room, to get, if possible, into the hall, where I was sure that I could burst through any opposition. So, now, I threw myself with all my weight against the door leading to it, giving a great shout as I did so, and making the panels crack and cry aloud. I made two of these charges, shouting all the time at the top of my lungs, and I am not sure but with a few more essays I could have broken even that great door down; but I thought my present plan a better one.

"Now, Mr. Bond," I said, and dragged him from his position by the bed over to the door. "Make as much noise as you can." And over my shoulder, as I dragged the bed away from the other door, I could see that, whether he understood or not, at least he was doing his mechanical best. I pushed the iron bed away with a great heave, and pulled open the door. As I had expected, I found the room before me empty, save for the still senseless form of my late adversary; and the door into the hall was open. I slipped across the room to it on tiptoes, and peered out into the hall. Mrs. Olsen, Doctor Mayhew, and the man I took to be the janitor, were gathered outside the door of the room I had just quitted.

"Bolts are half buckled already," I heard Doctor Mayhew say. "He'll be through in another minute. Stand ready with your slug-shot, Mat. He's too strong to stand any nonsense with. Get back a step or two, Mrs. Olsen; when the door breaks open, he'll tumble out with a rush."

It seemed to me that Mr. Bond's kicks were growing rather feeble, that in another moment they must detect the substitution, so that I gathered myself together and came down the little space of hall with a rush, pushing Mrs. Olsen roughly aside as I passed her, and giving the man with the slug-shot a blow that sent him against Doctor Mayhew. I had no time now to stop for Mrs. Lathrop. She was in no immediate danger and I could come back for her, but Nancy was in the "dark room," a place, it seemed to me, probably located in the cellar; so I ran the rest of the way down the hall, plunged down the stairs, and set about looking for a stairway that would lead me into the basement. Above me I could hear Mrs. Olsen calling loudly for help. I thought of the guards on the outside of the building, and running to the front door, made sure that it was locked, and dropped the great key into my pocket. The office door was closed now, but I threw it open and stepped in. A dark-haired young woman whom I took to be our little mercenary cowered before me into a corner.

"Quick," I said; "show me where the 'dark room' is."

"Oh," she moaned, "oh, oh! What have you done, what have you done? I did not know it was going to be like this. They will kill me for it, if they find out. Go away, oh, do go away."

"Nonsense," I said; "no one is going to hurt you. Show me where that dark room is."

"I dare not," she said piteously. "They will kill me, I tell you."

"They'll do nothing of the kind, if you'll hurry. I'll see that you get out all right. Can the guard outside get in any way but by the front door?"

"Yes," she said, "there is a door in the back. The cook would let them in."

"Well, show me that first."

She shrank still farther into her corner, laughing and sobbing half hysterically; then, with a little scream, she pointed to the window. I looked up to see the bearded face of the guard peering through the grating, looking at us both in fierce amazement. I picked the girl up in my arms and carried her, faintly struggling, to the hall.

"Now," I said, "if you're going to save your precious neck, you'd better help and help all you can. First show me that other door and then the dark room."

To my surprise she had stopped crying and, as we passed under the dim hall light, she glanced up at me with a sidelong flash of her black eyes.

"You're awfully strong," she said as I set her down, as if she had made an important discovery, and, slipping her hand into mine, she ran with me along the hall, passing through the one which bisected it at right angles and on toward the rear of the building, where she stopped before another door with her hand at her heart.

"Well," I said, "what is it?"

The hand which I held in my own tightened.

"The cook," she said; "what can you do with him?"

On the floor above Mrs. Olsen was still screaming, gathering vocal power, it seemed to me, with every passing second. I fumbled at the knob before me and, throwing the door open at last, stepped into the shadowed dimness of the great kitchen, pulling the maid in after me.

"He sleeps on a cot in the corner," she whispered; "shall I turn up the gas for you?"

"Yes," I said, and, dropping her hand, I closed the door after us, shutting out the growing pandemonium above.

In the sudden silence I heard the peaceful sound of a throaty snoring; then the dim gas-jet leaped into full power and the snoring stopped with a rumbling snort. Under its brilliance stood our little mercenary, her olive cheeks, still wet with tears, now flushing like a pomegranate, her primly dressed hair in some disarray, her black eyes snapping with excitement. She held her clasped hands high, leaning her cheek against them, like a school-girl at the crisis of her first play, a vivid bit of color in the great raftered room. Her eyes flashed to mine with the same look I had seen in the hall, a smile stirred at her lips, and she slowly turned her head and nodded toward the corner.

There, on a low cot, a big, blue-black negro was sitting up, a barbaric figure in ebony, swathed in the voluminous folds of a red flannel nightgown, a garment redder and more vivid even than the great cavern of his slowly gaping mouth, where a row of incredible teeth gleamed and glistened. He rubbed his eyes sleepily and stared at me, and rolled them solemnly around to the girl under the gas-jet.

"Yassah," he said, "yassah. I'se awake, sah." He was evidently too sleepy to have quite taken us in.

"Lock the back door, please," I said to the girl, "and bring me the key." While she ran to do it, I turned to pull down the shades. There were no shades, I found, but better yet, there were heavy inside shutters, which unfolded across the windows, and which I had but to drop a bar in place to secure. As I shut the last one I saw the dim figure of the guard in the darkness outside; and in a moment more he tried the door which we had locked. Now, with the shutters closed, the place was like a fortress.

"Who ah yo'? One o' they loonytics?"

The big black was fully awake now, and stood like an impossible pillar of fire, based and capped with coal, beside the cot that, by some miracle, had held him. He was not only tall but monstrously fat, so that the voluminous red flannel nightgown was quite tight at his stomach. The girl beside me giggled nervously.

"No, I'm not a lunatic," I said. "Go back and go to sleep."

The negro rolled his eyes over me with growing suspicion and menace.

"Listen," he said; "who dat? Who dat a yellin' and a yappin' and a proclaimin'? Sound to Abraham like ole Mis' Olsen. What you-all want in Abraham's kitchen? Guess ah better go see what's the mattah."

"No, you hadn't," I answered.

"Who-all's goin' to stop me?" he rumbled, scowling at me with a wrinkled frown, where savage menace and a sort of minstrel impudence shared alike. "Who-all's goin' to stop Abraham? That's what ah want to know."

I took a step toward him, doubling my fists as I came.

"Get back in that bed!" I said.

To my surprise he gave a howl of terror that was half a shriek, and flopped down on his knees, fairly groveling before me.

"Oh, Lawd Gawd," he cried; "oh, Lawd Gawd! Save pore ole Abraham." Then rolling his eyes up to me again. "Please go wuffum yere, Mr. Devil. Don't put yo' red-hot hand on Abraham."

I glanced at my doubled fist. Somewhere in the last few minutes, probably when I had dragged the cot away from the door up-stairs, my torn, split glove had been pulled away from my hand, leaving it the bare thing which even I did not like to see.

Instinctively I slipped my hand into the side pocket of my coat. "Come," I said to the girl, somewhat gruffly, "you're to show me where the dark room is."

She smiled back at me. "Yes," she said, "I know I am."

Evidently what she had seen had not frightened her, and I liked her for it.

"How about *him?*" she asked, pointing to the still groveling negro. Then standing on tiptoe and pulling me down until she could whisper close in my ear, "Do you dare to leave him here? Won't he undo the shutters?"

I stirred the red nightgown with my foot.

"Get up," I said, "and walk ahead of me."

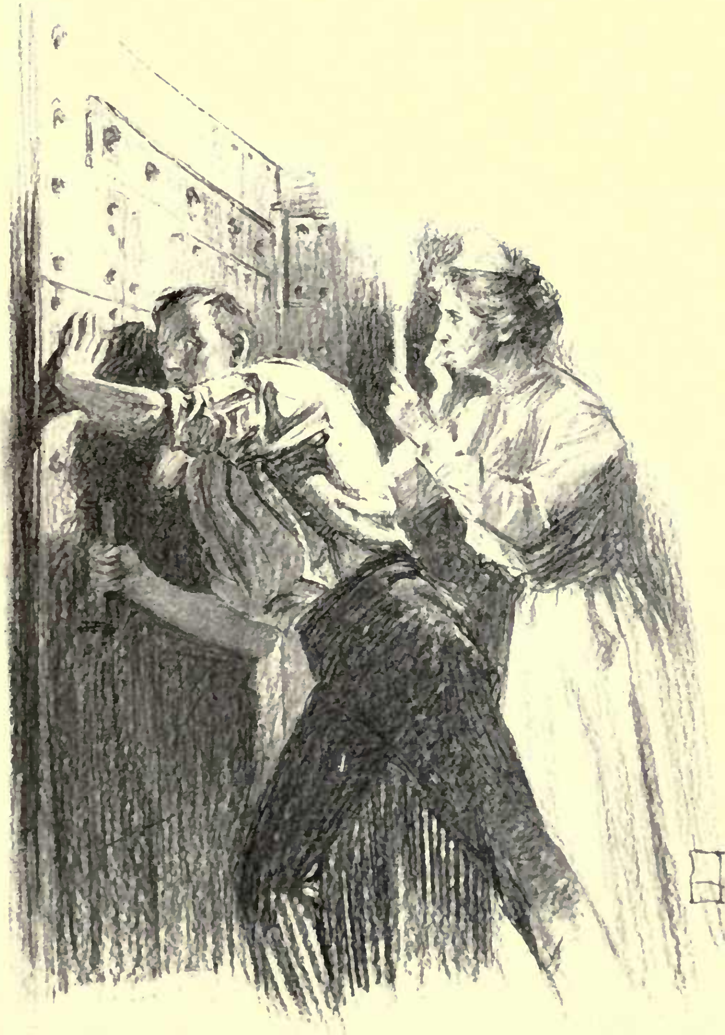
At the touch, he sprang to his feet and stood trembling.

"Where's you-all goin', Mistah Devil," he gasped; "not to that hot place, is yo'? S'cuse me, but ah yo' suah yo' ain' made no mistake? One ole niggah ain' nothin' to yo', an' deed it's mighty seeyus foh me."

Sweat was streaming down his face, which had turned slate-color.

"I'll think about it," I said; "get a lamp and come on, or perhaps a candle would do just as well." For his fright was so great I did not dare to trust him with a lamp.

So we went out to the hall again in single file, the girl walking first and looking back at us every



"In there," she whispered

few steps over her shoulder. The cook followed with his waving candle, and I walked behind. We walked a little way along the hall, turned into a dark archway, and went down a steep and narrow flight of stairs.

The basement was as intricate as the house above it. The dust of years lay there thick on the concrete floor and piles of miscellaneous lumber. Our path turned from right to left, from left to right again, winding through lanes of barrels and boxes, past latticed storerooms and boarded bins, circled an antiquated furnace, and came at last to a great square of masonwork, beneath what I judged was the very center of the house. The stone walls ran up solidly to the raftered ceiling, and must have enclosed a place about eighteen feet square, divided in the middle, as I soon found out, by another partition of stone, each division having a heavy door of studded iron plates. Both doors were locked and made fast by large, old-fashioned padlocks, and I judged that these dark cells had been originally the wine cellars of that bygone builder of the unlovely castle. To my relief I found a key hanging between the doors.

With a hand which shook a little in spite of me, I undid both locks and dropped them to the floor, swinging the heavy doors wide open.

"Nancy," I whispered; then louder, "Nancy!"

But with only the hollow echo of my own voice to answer me, my heart seemed to stop beating; for I thought that surely Nancy must have fainted in that horrible darkness. I took the candle from the trembling hand of the negro and entered the cell on my left hand. An old mattress lay in the corner with a moldering half-loaf of bread beside it. The place was as empty and desolate as a tomb. In the doorway loomed the cook, following me with rolling eyes which glimmered white in the candle-light. I had to push him aside to pass him as I went out. The other cell was absolutely empty. There was not even a mattress there. I held the candle high over my head to peer into its darkest corner.

"Look out," the girl called, in a queer, half-muffled little voice.

And I turned about to find her struggling valiantly with the big black in the very doorway, one crushing arm about her neck and her face almost buried in the folds of the voluminous nightgown. His other hand dragged the door toward them. I reached them with a bound and tore the negro's arm away, and as I did so, some of the hot wax from the candle must have spattered on his hand, for he shrieked aloud. By some dark mental process he had come, I believe, to doubt in the last few moments my supernatural powers, and with the opportunity before him had decided to take this chance of getting rid of me. But that splash of hot grease took all the fight out of him, and again he groveled at my feet.

" It buhns, it buhns," he groaned; " all dem little fiahs of hell is lickin' round me."

I kicked him this time in good earnest. The girl had gently taken the candle away from me, holding it high that I might see better and leaving my hands free. Now she pointed into the cavern of darkness before us.

" In there," she whispered.

I heard a trampling on the floor above. Without more ado, I pushed the negro into the dark room which held the mattress, slammed shut the iron door, and snapped the padlock into place.

XXVII

ESCAPE

"NOW," I said, "if I let you out, can you manage to slip past that guard and get home by yourself?"

"No," she said, "I don't believe I could. I think it is too late for that sort of thing, anyhow. You see the cook has seen me with you and he is sure to tell, so I might as well reconcile myself right now to losing my position."

"You could say I forced you to help me," I said.

She had turned and was already moving away, and I followed her slowly, gathering myself together for the work before me, and mechanically picking my way through the cellar, almost forgetting the existence of my guide. But at the foot of the steep basement stairs she paused, holding the candle so that her face was in the shadow.

"You see, the truth is," she said abruptly, "that I — that I — don't want to go home."

"'Don't want to go home?'" I repeated.

"No," she said, "I want to stay here and watch what happens. I won't be in your way."

And, as if the matter were settled, she tripped on ahead of me up the stairs.

At the top I paused and listened. Mrs. Olsen's screams had stopped; and, in its deathly silence, the house seemed to have an even more potent malignity. I knew, certainly, that at least three people were listening for me, three people whose livelihood I was threatening, whose very personal liberty was imperiled the moment I was outside of the place, and, from sheer necessity, they were bound to do me harm. Any corner I turned was pregnant with evil possibility. My fear was, of course, that I should be struck from behind, or shot from some hiding-place where my adversaries could lurk unseen. So that, once in the hall, I paused and listened with all my ears; for now I was frankly afraid, afraid of an attack which I could not guard against, and which might leave Nancy alone and unprotected, at the mercy of a danger I knew only too well. With all my heart I wished I had come to the place with three or four policemen at my heels, armed and clothed with the majesty of the law. But although this was the normal and rational thing to have done, I had put it aside after a little consideration; for I was pretty sure that such a place as this must have an understanding with the town authorities, and that, even if I persuaded them to give me any assistance, I must state pretty clearly my errand, and so, having given warning, would have found Nancy gone and everything apparently quite regular. And Nancy's extremity was too great to risk awaiting the unavoidable delays of any possible interference by the state.

"What are you going to do now?" whispered the little mercenary.

"I suppose the only thing I can do," I whispered back, "is to make a room to room search of the place."

"And get shot at the first corner?" she asked, as if she read my uneasiness.

"I'll have to chance that," I replied; "this isn't getting us anywhere, although it is an immense relief to know he lied about the dark room."

She looked up at me very seriously, then smiled, snuffed out the candle, and put it carefully into a corner. It seemed, at first, as if we were in the dark. Then, as my eyes grew accustomed to the change, I saw that some faint glimmer from far down the hall made the walls about us dimly visible. I glanced about for the girl beside me, and to my surprise saw her already tiptoeing ahead. I stole after her swiftly and caught her by the arm.

"What are you doing?" I asked angrily. "If I let you stay, you must come behind. Don't you realize they might kill you?"

"I don't think so," she whispered; "and, you see, it is the only way. It isn't me they want, it's you, and if I go ahead, at least they can't surprise you. Please, please let me," she went on, with a little catch at her breath, as I still held out. "I have never done anything for anybody before. I have never been of any real use. I'm not going to run much risk now; and it is worth it for — for the young lady, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, simply, "it is worth it," and I let her go again.

She gave a little sigh that was half a laugh, and stole forward along the hall, pausing every once in a while to listen. At the transverse hall she did not turn to the stairs as I had expected; but, when she had made sure it was empty, she crossed it and kept on straight for the front door and the office. I hesitated for a second, and then tiptoed after her; for, after all, she was right. From the basement we had certainly heard steps on this floor, and it was better now to find if it was really empty before we started to the second story; for if we left any one behind us they might in some way get out of the building and get additional reinforcement, or, even should this prove impossible, it was an added danger to have any one at our backs. At the office door she stopped again, one hand held up to keep me where I was, but I tiptoed on till I stood beside her. The light was still burning in the office, and through the open door was wafted the unmistakable smell of a very good cigar. I pushed the girl back and stepped into the office.

"Well," said Doctor Mayhew, "I have been expecting you for some minutes."

He was tilting back in a chair behind the desk, and with the words, he blew out a tremendous cloud of smoke, with an elaborate air of unconcern. I had come into the room half crouched for a spring, tensely ready to leap or strike at any least sign of awaiting hostility, so that this cool greeting came to me with all the unsettling force of the unexpected.

"Well, now that I have found you," I said, "I think that you can be of some use to me."

Doctor Mayhew raised his eyebrows. "How?" he asked, and for the first time I noticed that, in spite of his easy manner, much of his high color was gone, and that the hand which held the cigar trembled a little.

"I came here," I said, "as you probably know well enough, for one of your so-called 'patients.'"

"It seems to me you've gone about it in a strange way," he said. "If you had addressed yourself to me in the first place, I am quite sure there would have been no trouble. If you are dissatisfied with the treatment your aunt is receiving here, even now you are at perfect liberty to take her away."

"Come," I said angrily; "you are wasting time. Are you going to show me where you have put Miss Bond, or am I to be under the necessity of hurting you?"

"Miss Bond," he answered, in pained surprise;

"I was under the impression that you called your aunt Mrs. Lathrop. Just what right have you to interfere with Miss Bond?"

I took an angry step toward him. "I am that 'delusion' of hers, if you like," I said. "I know she has talked the matter over with you, for I heard her."

"You heard her?" said Doctor Mayhew, in what seemed to me a very genuine surprise.

"Yes, from the ivy outside her window," I answered impatiently. I am her husband, Doctor Mayhew, and I have come for her."

Doctor Mayhew whistled. "So that's true, then," he said; "then you are — er — Mason Ellsworth."

I nodded. Doctor Mayhew frowned.

"I hope you will believe," he said, "that this is a genuine surprise to me. Miss Bond was brought here by a medical man, a man whom I have every reason to believe is honest. She is, in fact, out of my jurisdiction. I'm sorry, Mr. Ellsworth, but, at the moment, I don't see what I can do to help you. Even if you had come to me in a proper manner, I should be at a loss to know what to do. It is very unfortunate that you did not tell me what you wanted in the first place, for then I might have been able to do something. As it is I have sent for the police."

"The police?" I asked.

"Certainly. You can hardly deny that you have been guilty of breaking in and assault. But I'll tell you what I'll do."

He got up from his chair and came around to my side of the desk. "I see that there has been some sort misunderstanding. I'll let you get away, if you want, and agree not to press the matter any further."

"Get away," I laughed; "why you can't even get out of the place yourself. If you won't help me willingly, I am going to take you along as best I can."

The doctor lowered his voice; his plump face took on an expression of unspeakable guile.

"Don't be too hasty," he said. "Why not settle this matter peacefully, Mr. Ellsworth? We're both of us sensible men and should be able to come to an understanding. If you will sit down there and write me a full release and your check say for — well, for five thousand dollars, I will manage somehow to send the young lady to you to-morrow morning."

He had taken up again his habit of pacing the floor.

"Doctor Mayhew," I said, "I wouldn't trust you with a blind man's pennies, since we are speaking as one man to another."

"Oh, very well," Doctor Mayhew answered. "Mat!"

From somewhere behind the great oblong desk arose the man I had seen on the floor above. His slug-shot had been laid aside for a revolver.

In his pacing the doctor had got between me and the door, and now threw his arms about me from behind.

" Come over and get him, Mat," he said.

I stood passively, knowing that I should not be shot at with the doctor behind me, for a bullet of any caliber would pierce us both; so that I let my arms drop at my side, as if the odds were at last too great for me; and as Mat came within reach I wrenched myself away from the doctor's foolish hold, and struck the man with the revolver reeling back against the desk. He dropped the weapon as he fell, and I stamped on Doctor Mayhew's fingers as he reached for it, so that he yelled with pain like a little boy. Then I stepped back to the doorway and, with the little mercenary at my heels, raced for the stairs.

There was a muffled sound of hubbub in the upper hall, a trampling of feet, a stifled scream, and then, to my astonishment, a trill of pealing laughter; then again the scuffle and the trampling. I had just decided that this came from Mrs. Lathrop's room, when the door opened, and down the dim hall, her hand still hesitant upon the latch, poised as lightly and as straight and fair as some young goddess, Nancy stood looking about her.

In a moment, and almost before I could move, she had seen me and ran joyfully forward, straight into my arms; her own she flung about my neck, and I caught her to me and kissed her in a blinding wave of happiness. For a little neither of us spoke, only she clung very closely to me; while a measureless relief and joy surged dizzily at my heart and brain.

Nancy gave a little sigh and stirred gently in my arms. "You must let me go, Mason," she whispered.

"No, right away," as I held her closer. "Listen, Mason, *do* listen. We must hurry, hurry, you understand. Mrs. Olsen is in there with Mrs. Lathrop. Come, you must help her right away." She tugged in imploring impatience at my hand.

"Mrs. Olsen," I repeated, trying to clear my brain.

"Yes," said Nancy; "she came into my room and got me, you know, and put me in with Mrs. Lathrop. A little while ago she came back, and Mrs. Lathrop was waiting for her, and — oh, do hurry, Mason."

"All right," I said; "but I'm not going to let you out of my sight again for any Mrs. Lathrop."

"Of course not," said Nancy. "Hurry."

Now that I thought about it again, I heard that the trampling still continued, and as we reached the room, another muffled shriek sounded from within. I threw the door wide open, and gasped with surprise at the strange sight within. A great striped, blue-ticked pillow lay at my very feet. The floor was a tangled swirl of sheets and blankets, and over it gyrated a broad and apparently headless figure, to which a very rumpled Mrs. Lathrop clung with little, wiry arms.

"What on earth!" I exclaimed.

"A pillow case," said Mrs. Lathrop, over her shoulder, as the whirling headless figure swung her half off her feet. "Get a sheet and tie her up. Can't you see I'm busy?"

I snatched a sheet from the floor, and after some difficulty succeeded in swathing Mrs. Olsen in it like a mummy, and laying her on the bare springs of the bed.

"I snuffed her out like a candle," Mrs. Lathrop chuckled, gaspingly, as she twisted her disordered hair into place. "Thank Heaven, that pillow case was new and not as acid-rotted as the rest of the bedclothes. I was waiting for her as she came in. I guess we're about square now." She pushed a long hair-pin home and sighed contentedly.

"Well," I said, "she will at least do very well where she is. And now I think we'd better be going."

Indeed, I momentarily began to dread a fresh attack from Doctor Mayhew and his man.

I glanced up anxiously. Nancy was standing in the doorway and, behind her in the hall stood the little mercenary. Following my gaze Mrs. Lathrop caught sight of her.

"Well, Flora," she said, "on the whole you have done very nicely. Suppose you run to the head of the stairs so you can let us know if any one's coming. Now, Mason Ellsworth, how do you propose to get us poor women out of here?"

"I'm not quite sure," I said; "either by the front door or by the back door. I'll have to see how things are below."

"Then," Mrs. Lathrop chirped, with a triumphant glance backward at the bundled form of Mrs. Olsen, "you go on ahead and Nancy and I will come after you."

"Wait a minute," I said, when we got into the hall; "I have a scheme."

And leaving them standing together, I ran to the room where I had been trapped, and swung Doctor Morrison up on my shoulder. I found him lying in the same position, groaning a little with some slight signs of returning life; but over my shoulder he lay limply enough, with swaying arms that thudded against my back as I ran. Nancy turned white and gave a little gasp as I came back with him. Mrs. Lathrop skipped around behind me to make sure who it was that I carried.

"Good boy," she said, in such a triumphantly sporting tone and with such an indescribable emphasis of a fellow conqueror, that, for all the grave work still before me, I laughed in spite of myself.

The little mercenary met us at the head of the stairs, her eyes round with wonder at the burden I carried.

"I've been all the way down," she said, flushing, with a sudden little sidelong look at Nancy. "They are still in the office, I think."

"All right," I said; "just keep behind us."

In that order we went down. Once on the stairs I glanced over my shoulder at Nancy, and she smiled at me bravely, although her eyes shunned the head that dangled at my back. At the corner, before I turned into the longer hall, I shifted the weight on my shoulder, until I held him, awkward in his great bulk, before me.

We had come almost to the office before Doctor Mayhew made any sign. Then he stepped into the hall with the other man at his heels. The office must have held quite an armament; for I had already taken one revolver from Doctor Mayhew, and now, not only was he holding another in his uninjured hand, but his man had one also.

"Keep behind me in single file," I said to the others, "so that I am directly in front of you."

I clasped Doctor Morrison to me with one arm, and with the other hand drew Doctor Mayhew's lost revolver from my pocket; and so we bore steadily down upon them. Doctor Mayhew raised his revolver; then lowered it, when he saw what shield I carried in front of me. The man with him would have shot, I think, whether or no, had Mayhew not struck up his hand; for his eyes blazed at me furiously, and, as I came near, I saw that his jaw hung loosely, as if it had been broken.

"Now," I said, "get back into that office and shut the door behind you."

Doctor Mayhew shifted nervously, but neither of them obeyed me; so I shot safely over their heads. At that Mayhew bolted for the office, and although the other man lingered threateningly, another and closer shot made him follow after. He did not shut the door; but before I could stop her, the maid had left the line behind me, and skimming down the hall, close to the office side, had reached the door and slammed it after them. I followed as fast as I was able, and propped my burden against it, as some makeshift against its sudden opening; and while the women crowded about me, Nancy close at my side, I got the big key from my pocket, and turned the grumbling lock between us and freedom, then took it out again, and opened the ponderous door upon the sweet air of early morning. Before I could close and lock it behind us, there came an irregular scurry of feet along the hall, two hands beat frantically on the other side, and through the narrowing opening Ephraim Bond squeezed out, and collapsed on the steps at our feet.

XXVIII

AN OLD FRIEND

"SAKES alive!" gasped Mrs. Lathrop, "another of them? Is that a patient or one of the jailers?"

"It seems to have been a patient," I answered; "and I'm afraid he isn't quite as harmless as he looks. I'm not even sure that I ought to let him go."

Nancy was already stooping tenderly over him, Now she recognized him with a little start. Nevertheless there was no fear in the eyes she turned to mine.

"Do you know who he is, Mason?" she asked gravely.

"Yes," said I, "but I haven't the slightest idea how he got there. We'd better not put him back, I suppose, nor do I think we need concern ourselves further about him just now. I have things to say to him, but they can wait. I want to speak to Doctor Mayhew for a moment, then we must get back to the inn."

Close to the ivy I crept along the side of the building until I came to the office window.

"Doctor Mayhew," I called, without showing myself.

"Well, what do you want?" a voice from inside answered sulkily.

"Just this," I said. "You're locked in now and I have the keys of both the front and the back door, so that I think you'll have some trouble in getting out. I do not know how long you have been running this place; but you ought to be in jail for running it at all, and you know it. I propose, however, to give you a chance. I imagine, from what you said to Mrs. Ellsworth the other evening, that you have at least some spark of decency. You had better encourage it. I am going to send the keys back to you in an hour or so. In the next week I expect you to arrange to have all your 'patients' taken back to their homes. After that, if you'll take my advice, you will engage passage as soon as possible for Europe, where you'd better arrange to pass the remainder of your life in some degree of decency. For I am going to give you just long enough to undo the harm you have done here, or at least to undo it to what measure you are able, and to get safely to the other side. This should take not more than two weeks. After that I am going to swear out a warrant for your arrest."

Doctor Mayhew's face appeared at the window.

"Will you swear to that, Mr. Ellsworth?" he asked.

"Certainly not," I said; "and if you should be suddenly tempted to shoot at us from the window, you can count on being arrested before the day is over. On the whole, don't you think I am treating you pretty well, Doctor Mayhew?"

"Yes," he said, "I suppose you are. It was a mistake, I'll admit, to hold Miss Bond, but our sanatorium has always ranked —"

"Rubbish," I interrupted. "Turn your first new leaf by getting over that trick of perjury. You have two weeks, Doctor Mayhew. Good-by. It is understood, of course, that you pay all 'patients'' expenses home."

He nodded dumbly.

"Oh, by the way," I called back, as I turned to go, "you'll find Mrs. Olsen up-stairs in my aunt's pretty room, and if you want breakfast, you'll have to let your cook out of the cellar. I locked the poor fellow in one of those dark cells."

It had momently been growing lighter, and now the gray of early morning trembled and flushed with the imminent dawn. Streamers and pennants of rose and beryl were flung from the expectant eastern horizon to the zenith, across the heaven's pale amethyst, broadening and merging, until all the east glowed in a gold-shot glory, a tender, ineffable wonder of coming dawn.

We must, I think, have looked a strange group in the magic light of that May morning. Mrs.

Lathrop, although she had set herself somewhat to rights, had something of the impudent, roystering air lent by ruffled plumage, and her usual stay-at-home pallor was stained by the flush of triumphant excitement. The dark face of the little maid wore two high spots of color, and her great eyes looked tired and feverish, while her primness, like that of Mrs. Lathrop's, seemed rumpled and tumbled out of reality. Ephraim Bond, shrinking half behind them, looked smaller than my memory of him, a wispish, white shred of a man, a flayed soul cringing before the beauty of the day. And I knew myself to look no more normal than the rest. My clothes were torn and dirty; my face smutched and streaked with cobwebs, my left hand half covered by a torn glove, my right hideous in unaccustomed nakedness. Of us all Nancy alone seemed neither garish nor out of place, but stood with the dawn's glory in her eyes, as fresh and fair and lovely as some new-awakened flower, seeming herself the very embodiment of the soft fires of dawn, as if morning itself yearned toward her and in very ecstasy spread the earth as a carpet for her feet.

She must have felt my look; for slowly and confidently she turned her eyes to mine, bride eyes, that bared for me the tender eternal mystery of the soul within, held my own for an infinite instant, and again were softly veiled, deep mirrors of the joy of sunrise. From some near-by meadow a thrush burst suddenly into song, a cascading, liquid trill of rapturous melody. Nancy smiled with it and stretched out her hand to me, and without a spoken word we turned our backs upon the nightmare of the ivied building, and took the road toward the village. Somewhere behind us the others followed — already I had forgotten them. For a while we still went on in silence, walking hand in hand, as two children might. The sun now was fairly risen, and on all sides of us dew-laden grass and leaf flashed and sparkled. Song sparrows leaped to hedge tops at our coming, fluttered and poised a moment, warbled snatches of their morning roundelays and fluttered on to some new vantage point. Nancy sighed contentedly.

"I was not afraid," she said, "not at all afraid, except for you, for I knew that you would come and that everything would be all right. But oh, Mason dear, I am glad that it is over. It was the waiting, I think, that was the hardest."

"Do you care," I asked, "to go home again? Home, I mean, where I first took you, or does the place frighten you now?"

Nancy shook her head. "I hoped you would want to go there, Mason, because of so many things; good things, that were so much bigger than the bad."

From somewhere ahead of us I heard a faint throbbing, a muffled pulsation of sound that grew steadily louder. Nancy looked up at me inquiringly. We both stopped and listened. Over the crest of a hill, about half a mile away, appeared an automobile, a little, sweeping thing that came down the road at gathering speed, breaking the quiet with an increasing roar, and growing and looming as it drew near like some red, insane monster, taking a senseless, pre-prandial rush across country. Its red paint flashed and glittered, and a long trail of dust stretched behind it over the road.

We stood aside to let it pass, but it slowed down and stopped, panting in the road before us. A rather grimy young fellow in dusty, corded livery sat at the wheel, and beside him a little man in goggles, swaddled in an enormous ulster, whose collar nearly reached the cloth cap which he had pulled down over his eyes. The little man beckoned me with a gauntleted hand, and I stepped across to the car, thinking that he wanted to ask some question about the road.

"I'll trouble you, Mr. Ellsworth," he said, "to act quite as if you had expected me, as if you had — a — employed me, in fact, to come and pick you up on this fine May morning. Is that Nancy Bond there? My goggles are somewhat dusty."

"How on earth, Mr. Ogilby," said I, "did you manage to get here?"

"I'll tell you about it some other time," he said shortly. "Got the letter you mailed day before yesterday. Took train to Buffalo and hired this car. We can all go back in it. It's much more private. Where's that Mrs. Lathrop? By the way, I congratulate you. Were you hurt?"

"No," I said, "and I'll tell you all about *that* some time. Mrs. Lathrop should be right behind us somewhere. I'm afraid I'd rather forgotten about her."

"That's her coming now, I guess," the chauffeur observed.

I looked back down the road. I had not been conscious that Nancy and I were walking fast, but either this had been the case, or the others had lagged sorely; for, even yet, they were some distance behind; Mrs. Lathrop, in a conversation with the maid, which was plainly animated; Ephraim Bond trailing dejectedly a few yards behind them.

"Yes, that is Mrs. Lathrop," I told Mr. Ogilby. "The girl with her is one of the maids of the sanatorium."

"And who," inquired Mr. Ogilby, "who is that behind them? Is he one of your party?"

"I should hardly call him one of our party," I laughed. "For some reason I do not yet understand I found him locked up in the sanatorium. You said you knew him, I believe. He is Ephraim Bond, Nancy's uncle."

"Ephraim Bond!" exclaimed Mr. Ogilby, as if I had named Beelzebub. "I won't have him in the car, do you understand? I won't have him in the car."

He rose cautiously from his seat to stare back along the road, brushing his gauntlets across his dusty goggles, and after a long scrutiny, sitting down with a chuckle.

"Locked up in the sanatorium," he repeated half to himself. "Locked up, you say? Are you quite sure of that?"

"I certainly found him in a locked room," I replied. "In fact, it took me some little time to convince him that I myself was not responsible for his being there."

"'The way of the transgressor,'" murmured Mr. Ogilby. "It's the funniest thing I ever heard in all my life. Did he — did he seem to like it?"

"He was under two emotions," I replied, "fear and rage."

"Well, what made you let him out?"

"I don't know," I answered. "It was partly force of circumstances, partly because he is, after all, Nancy's uncle, you know. Besides, I have a good deal to say to him, now that I have found him, and while he is still in a chastened frame of mind."

"All right," said Mr. Ogilby, "you can put him in the tonneau. We will take him back as far as the inn, at any rate. Then we shall see. You're not to expect me to talk, however. As I have said, I have some acquaintance with him, and just at present I am very anxious that he should not recognize me. Just bundle them in as soon as they come up, and give your orders to the chauffeur as if you quite expected us to meet you."

All our conversation had been carried on almost in whispers. Now, as the others were drawing near, I opened the door of the tonneau, and beckoning Nancy from the roadside, settled her in the automobile.

"I'll tell you all about it later," I whispered to her. "Hurry, Mrs. Lathrop," I called. "We're not going to wait for the morning train."

Mrs. Lathrop came up with some surprise in her eyes.

"You didn't say anything to me about an automobile," she said; "still I always have admired the thought of riding in one." And she hopped into the car, smiled at Nancy, and sat down beside her.

"Come," I said to the maid, "shall we take you back to the village?"

"I hardly know," she said. "No, I shall not go back to the village, Mr. Ellsworth. There is a short cut to my home a little way below here, and I can walk there easily enough. Do you think they'll arrest me if I stay?"

"I'm sure they won't," I replied. "I think I have convinced Doctor Mayhew of the absurdity of making trouble for any one. I still owe you some money though, you may remember. Where shall I send it?"

She flushed and hesitated. "Mr. Ellsworth," she said, "I would rather not have the money."

"That's absurd," I said; "it's a bargain. You have earned it."

Her color grew deeper, and as she raised her dark eyes, I saw that there were tears in them.

"Will you think it impertinent," she asked, "if I don't take it? I like to feel that — that perhaps I have been of some help, though I wanted the money badly enough at first. But can't you believe that I forgot about it, that the help I gave you in the end was only because — because I wanted to of my own free will? Can you possibly think of a girl like me as — as a friend, Mr. Ellsworth?"

"Why, yes," I replied, suddenly a little embarrassed, "and there's my hand on it. But if you get into any straits, a letter will reach me addressed to the Hotel Gloria, New York City."

She took my ungloved hand in both of hers, looked into my eyes for a moment, then looked past me to Nancy and back to me again.

"I hope you will be very happy," she said and started as if to pass us.

"Wait a moment," I said; "I want to ask something still further of your friendship."

She had dashed the tears from her eyes, and now she was smiling at me.

"I want you to take these keys," I said, "and see that they get to some one who will let out our prisoners. And there is a man I tied up, behind that clump of bushes opposite the sanatorium. He ought to be set free as soon as possible. I am afraid he is pretty cramped already, and although he doesn't deserve it, I am going to let him go this time. Can you have these things done for me?"

"Yes," she said, and tucked the big keys into her belt. "Would it be too much trouble," she asked hesitatingly, "to see if you could find me a place in a good hospital? I would work very hard, Mr. Ellsworth." She hesitated again; then, "And very honestly," she added.

"I am sure of that," I answered gravely. "Write me at the Hotel Gloria, telling me about yourself, and I will see what I can do."

She went over to the automobile and said good-by to Nancy. Mrs. Lathrop from her high seat patted her on the shoulder, and both called good-by after her as she set out across the fields. I turned to find Ephraim Bond standing in the middle of the road, like some lost soul alone in infinite space.

"Well," I said, "hadn't you better get into the automobile?"

He started as if he had been struck, and without answering me, moved apathetically forward and climbed into a place beside Mrs. Lathrop. I got up after him, closing the door after me, and perched myself on the upholstered side where I could be close to Nancy.

"All right," I said; "let her go."

The soft purr of the waiting motor broke abruptly into a roar. The car started forward with an almost imperceptible jerk. The chauffeur threw in the high, stilling the motor into a steady drone, and we started to glide up the gentle hill with a growing and easy velocity. Fields that I had begun to know already slipped kaleidoscopically behind us, and miles that had seemed long to walk or drive were only brief ribbons of road to our devouring speed. At the inn we slowed down and came to a stop. It was full daylight now, and the little country village was already astir. Blinds were everywhere being thrown open as we passed, and a yawning hired man was sousing the inn steps with water.

Mr. Ogilby whispered something to his chauffeur, and they both climbed out and went into the inn, in the door of which the chauffeur presently reappeared and beckoned me.

"See what they want," said Nancy, and I vaulted over the side of the car and followed the chauffeur into a little waiting-room, where I found Mr. Ogilby waiting for me.

"I have decided," he began abruptly, "not to go on any farther. The car is really carrying too much weight, and besides,— well, I've determined to go back by train.

"No, don't argue about it," he went on, as I started to interrupt. "I am quite determined. You're to take the car and use it as long as you like. That is all arranged for. Can you run it yourself?"

"Why, yes," I said in my surprise; "but —"

"Please don't start arguing," said Mr. Ogilby; "if you can run it, go out and do it. I'm going to keep the chauffeur to do some things for me. You can make much better time going light. Take Nancy in the front seat with you and make a pleasant trip of it. If you'll take my advice, though, you will drop Ephraim Bond as soon as you've had your talk with him." He paused with a sudden chuckle. "To think of his being locked up in that sanatorium," he said. "It's the funniest thing I ever heard in my life. Well, run along now. I have had your things put into the automobile. You will find plenty of road maps under the driver's seat. I will pay your bill here. Remember, though, you're not to talk about me."

He gave my hand a quick grasp, gave me a lusty thwack between the shoulders, and with both hands pushed me toward the door.

XXIX

THE MAN IN THE BROWN DERBY

"WHERE are your friends?" Mrs. Lathrop asked, as I came out again to the car and started cranking up.

"Friends?" I repeated, remembering Mr. Ogilby's injunction. "Oh, you mean the two men that brought the car to meet us. They aren't going on any farther."

"Oh, I see," Mrs. Lathrop replied, but I do not think she did at all; for I had told her something of my means, and this sudden acquisition of a large automobile must have nearly strained her curiosity to the bursting point. Nevertheless, she crossed her hands in resignation.

"I only hope," she said, leaning back, "that you have some idea how to run one of these things, and will keep in mind that life is still sweet to me, Mr. Ellsworth."

"I think you can depend on me," I answered; "and Nancy, if she will, is going to sit in front with me, which," I added maliciously, "will give you an opportunity for a little tête-à-tête with Mr. Bond. By the way, I beg your pardon; I am afraid you have not met Mr. Bond. Mrs. Lathrop, may I introduce Mr. Bond? You have heard me speak of him, I am sure. He is my uncle-in-law, and he is going down with us into Pennsylvania."

Mrs. Lathrop sniffed, and, I regret to say, winked at me portentously.

"Mr. Bond," she said, "you don't know how pleased I am to meet you. Mason has said so much of his fairy godfather."

Ephraim Bond said nothing, and looked so wan and dazed and stricken that I almost found it in my heart to be sorry for him. Mrs. Lathrop evidently was made of sterner stuff, and as Nancy changed into the front seat, I heard her assuring him of the joy it must be to shower blessings with such an open hand. Then, with Nancy by my side, and the open road before me, with home at its farther end, I forgot about them, as I had already done once that morning. For a little while we talked in monosyllables. A strange shyness seemed to have come upon Nancy; and acquainting myself with the intricacies of an unfamiliar car took my mechanical attention. At the first crossroads we stopped, and I had out my road maps; for it occurred to me joyfully that I need not take the roundabout route via New York, nor perhaps even return as far as Syracuse, but could strike directly south, cutting into Pennsylvania somewhere below Binghamton and, by way of Scranton, come down to Doylestown and home. Nancy held the fluttering maps straight in her lap, while I painfully plotted our route and made some rough estimation of the miles; finding, to my surprise, that we had but little over two hundred and fifty miles to go, with such an early start, a not impossible day's journey for the car I was driving. The road was perfect, and save for an occasional farmer or dairyman we had it to ourselves, so that by breakfast time we were in Cortland.

And we were all of us very ready for breakfast. The rush through the May sunshine, and perhaps some measure of re-found happiness, had acted on Nancy like a tonic. Mrs. Lathrop was once again her natural, vivacious, bird-like self. Even Ephraim Bond, by what miracle of teasing and cajolery I could never understand, looked, not himself again, but a new and altogether more pleasing old gentleman. At the hotel I made some shift at removing the marks of my night conflict, and although my clothes were so torn that I thought it best to sit down at table in a driving dust-coat, yet, but for this incongruity, I felt, and I think looked, fairly presentable. Nancy, I know, was a radiant creature, whose sparkling beauty fairly dazzled me. She was hatless, of course, but with Mrs. Lathrop's voluminous veil half shrouding the glory of her hair, caught in some dexterous intricacy at the neck, and falling from her shoulders in wondrous folds that I am sure it had never known, she had all the dainty loveliness of some incarnate Tanagra. I proposed that she should rest after breakfast, but she would have none of it.

"We have gone such a little way," she said, "and truly, I am not at all tired, and I want, oh, I so very much want to get home."

Mrs. Lathrop herself seemed impatient to be on the way. What Ephraim Bond felt did not in the least matter. When we were once on the road again I turned to Nancy.

"Do you feel like telling me about it?" I asked rather uncertainly. "I want to know, but of course I can wait."

Nancy put her hand on my arm. "I want to tell you," she said. "It doesn't trouble me; nothing can now, Mason; and I know that you must be very perplexed about it all.

"After you left me, I went about that dear, sweet old house with the good woman you had left with me, straightening little things and arranging them, putting our purchases on the kitchen shelves, and making my little bow to the place that was to be home. I wonder if you know, Mason, how sweet it all was, how wonderful and new and old, as if I had been dropped suddenly into a place much better than heaven, which somehow did not surprise me at all. I am afraid I left most of the work to Mrs. Blake; for I ran in and out of doors and up and down stairs, fairly reveling in it all; and I tried not to think you were taking long, and then not to be afraid because the time was so short, and after I had looked again to see if you were coming, I went up to my room, and getting some sewing, played that I was very domestic indeed. I don't know how he ever came in so quietly, Mason. I did hear a little noise just before he came into the room, so that I laid aside my embroidery and jumped up.

"And then it was awful. He stood in the door and laughed at me, an insolent, terrible laugh, Mason, that frightened me so I could not move until he touched me; and then it was too late, for he got both my wrists in one of those great hands of his, and though I fought as hard as I was able, he dragged me over to the window and tied my hands together with the curtain cord. That Mrs. Olsen came into the room then (I thought she was Mrs. Blake at first, and called out to her), and each of them took an elbow and half carried me out to the buggy they had waiting in the road. You know the rest of it, Mason. We stayed at Mrs. Lathrop's that night, and I wrote a note to you there. Next morning we went on to New York, and spent that night at a lodging-house in Syracuse; and the morning after that they took me to Winford, and locked me up in that sanatorium.

"It was cruelly easy to do it all. From Philadelphia to New York, and from New York to Syracuse we had a private compartment on the train, but once in the Pennsylvania station and once in the lodging-house at Syracuse I managed to speak to people; but it wasn't of the slightest use. The one word 'insane' made people shrink away from me. Any determined man and woman, posing as doctor and nurse, could, I think, abduct almost anyone else. People take the word of the majority so much as a matter of course. It is not like being a criminal, where they have to prove you guilty. For some reason people accept the premise that you are insane until you have proved that you are not, and then hurry away without giving you any chance of making such a proof.

"Neither of them talked to me much while we were traveling, but as soon as I was safely locked up, he came into my room and had a long talk with me. He told me, in the first place, that I was not really married to you, and then he said that he could keep me there until I consented to marry him, even if he had to wait a year or so. I told him that he had forgotten one thing, that a person had to be judged insane by the court; but he said as no one knew where I was, and as Doctor Mayhew agreed with him, he thought we might dispense with that formality."

While Nancy talked I let the car drop to a more gentle rate of speed, that I might listen without danger to us all.

"Nancy," I said, "do you know that you have never told me who the man is? His name was torn off the note you gave me at Mrs. Lathrop's, and Doctor Mayhew came in before I could ask you, there at the window at the sanatorium. I know what he looks like and that he calls himself Doctor Morrison. Who is he, Nancy?"

Nancy looked over her shoulder where her uncle and Mrs. Lathrop sat in the tonneau.

"He is his son," she said, in a very soft voice; "my own cousin, Erskine Bond."

"Your cousin?" I repeated aloud.

"Hush," said Nancy, "he'll hear."

But I think that Ephraim Bond had already caught the name of his son, softly as she had whispered it, and in spite of the faint drumming of the motor.

"Yes, my son," he said, leaning forward between us; "for my sins, my own son."

Our road was winding through a long strip of woods. Now I slowed down the motor, and backed the car from the road into a vague logging trail that emerged between the beeches, running cautiously backward until the yellow highway was only a door of light ahead of us. There I brought the car to a standstill and shut off the power. I turned to find Mr. Bond white and frightened at his own admission and the suddenness of my manœuver. But for Mrs. Lathrop's excited clutch on his sleeve, I think he would have tried to climb out of the car. I did not speak to him for a moment, but turned again to Nancy.

"He was the man behind the curtain that first day then," I said. "You knew he was in the house then, Nancy?"

She nodded. "Yes," she said, "I thought it was he, and it frightened me, for he had no business there then."

"No, he had not," Ephraim Bond interrupted. "I had forbidden him the house, forbidden it for all time. If I had known he was there, if you had had the sense to tell me, Nancy, I should have called the police; but I never suspected it until I saw him running after a bus just as you drove away."

I sat silent, thinking. Furtively Nancy's hand stole gently into mine.

"But, why," I asked, "didn't you tell me about him in the first place? I should think it would have been the first thing you would have told me."

Nancy looked up at me and actually laughed. "And lose you the next minute?" she said. "I knew you too well, and not well enough." Her face grew serious. "I really meant to tell you, Mason. I was going to tell you. It was you yourself who stopped me. Do you remember our walk into the village together, when I tried to tell you all about my life, and what it had been? I would have told you then about Erskine, although I didn't like even to think of him, but I was afraid to. I told you about Uncle Ephraim and that was bad enough. Do you know what you said you would like to do to him?"

"Kill him, I think," I confessed.

Ephraim Bond moaned in the seat behind us, so that I suppose he was listening.

"Well," Nancy said, "it frightened me terribly. For all I knew, you might have turned around and gone right back to New York. If I told you about my cousin, I was sure that you would do so. You were all the happiness I had in the world, Mason." She smiled at me again. "I loved you distractedly even then, you see. My father was dead and you were all I had. I didn't want revenge, I wanted happiness. I wanted to put them all out of my life, and only prayed that they would never come into it again. I meant to tell you some day, when I could make you understand all that. I couldn't afford to risk it then, and I couldn't tell you how much I cared. Surely, you know that I never loved Erskine. I do not need to tell you that. Moreover I do not think that he ever loved me. Uncle Ephraim knows why he wanted to marry me."

She was trying, I know, to deal mercifully with the old man in the tonneau; but, in spite of herself, a little tinge of bitterness crept into her voice.

"He arranged the marriage," she went on; "he and father between them, he told me, although I have never believed that. I have never known why it was, why everybody seemed to want it so much, unless it had something to do with money; for I have never liked Erskine, and they all knew it. When he began to make love to me I detested him. Was it money, Uncle Ephraim?" she asked.

Ephraim Bond sank back against the leather cushions, white and silent.

"Answer her," I said.

He moaned and winced as if I had struck him. Mrs. Lathrop hopped to her feet and fairly shook him.

"Answer her! Answer her!" she cried. "Don't be a fool. Nobody's going to kill you."

She had some strange power that Ephraim Bond seemed unable to resist. He raised one hand to his trembling lips, and looking away from us, began to speak in a colorless monotone.

"It was the wish of my brother," he said; "his living wish and his dying wish, that our two families should be held together yet closer. He even —" Mr. Bond paused.

"Yes," Mrs. Lathrop prompted. "He even said so in his will. Of course it was money. You might as well tell about it."

"Against my judgment," the old man whispered, "quite against my judgment, he did make such an arrangement in his will. He had a little money, not much, but a little. This was to go to Nancy if she married my son."

I pressed Nancy's hand and smiled at her reassuringly.

"It doesn't seem possible," she said. "They told me father wished it, but I never believed them. He could not have been himself to have written such a thing."

"Perhaps it was written for him," I said. "Well, Mr. Bond, and if Nancy did *not* marry your son?"

"It was all quite, quite against my judgment," he quavered; "you understand that; but my brother was so set on the matter, I could not influence him. I did not approve of such a will, but he was very headstrong, very headstrong."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Lathrop, "that, if Nancy refused to do this, the money reverted to you."

Ephraim Bond looked up at her quickly, his rabbit chin trembling and his pale eyes wide with terror.

"It was quite against my will," he repeated.

"Of course," Mrs. Lathrop commented dryly.

"Then I suppose," I said, "you quarreled with your son for some reason or other, and decided that you could get this money for yourself, and brought me in to help you."

But his fear seemed to have at last quite overmastered him, making him incapable of further coherent thought or answer.

"It was quite against my wish," he whispered again, as if no thought were behind the words.

Nancy was crying softly, and I put my arm about her.

"Dear heart," I said, "can you forgive me? I meant so to help you, and it seems I have only done you a wrong."

She took my face between gentle hands and kissed me.

"Wrong?" she said, "wrong? You've done me the greatest right in the world. Surely, Mason, you will not hurt me by thinking I cared about the money? What difference can money make? Do you think I would not work on my knees all my life for you? It is happiness and love that I want, and you, Mason; for you are both of them to me. Money! when all my world is you? It was thinking about poor father that made me cry; what they must have done to him to make him write such things!"

"*If* he wrote them," I said. "From what I know of your uncle and cousin, I think that we can be pretty sure that he did not. They may have made him sign something without reading it, but that is all he could have done."

"You forget, Mason," said Nancy, "that he was not himself for a good many years."

I got out of the automobile and lifted Ephraim Bond bodily from his seat, carrying him out of hearing; for a new thought had come to me, something that was not for Nancy's ears.

"I know now," I said, holding him at arm's length, "where your son got his suggestion."

"What do you mean?" he cried, struggling. "What suggestion?"

"I mean," said I, "that he took an easy method of disposing of two perfectly sane people; and I think, Mr. Bond, that he learned that method at home. I shall keep you with me until I learn if the original method ended, perhaps, in murder."

XXX

THE CATASTROPHE

EPHRAIM BOND did not answer me, and I half marched, half dragged him back to the car, returning him to the tonneau with, I fear, no gentle hand.

For a few miles the car ran well; then something went wrong, and although I stopped again and again to look for the trouble, I was unable to locate it. Motors, like people, seem subject to small, vague indispositions which, aside from a thorough overhauling, defy a diagnosis. We would run for a mile or so with a perfect and gratifying smoothness, then the motor would unaccountably begin to skip, change its mind and run again smoothly, then come to an unexpected and absolute standstill, so that luncheon time found us only as far as Binghamton. And although during the afternoon we managed to cross the state line and get into Pennsylvania, yet as the afternoon advanced it became more and more plain that we should be unable to reach home that night, and as we limped into Scranton barely in time for a late supper, with over half our journey still before us, we resigned ourselves wearily to fate and decided to spend the night there. I was able to get a good room for Nancy and Mrs. Lathrop, and passable accommodation for Ephraim Bond and myself. I could have done better, the hotel-keeper informed me, if I wished to take a single room, but I found myself unwilling to let Nancy's devious uncle out of my sight. Even after we had registered, and I had left Nancy and Mrs. Lathrop to get ready for supper, I took Mr. Bond with me to the garage recommended by the proprietor, where they optimistically hoped to have the car in good driving condition by starting time the next day.

Of supper we made but a poor meal. All of us were, I think, tired and a little nervous, for the vexatious, halting journey recalled and emphasized the fatigues of the previous sleepless night, which, under the first stimulus of pleasant driving, we had forgotten.

"It will be much nicer," Nancy said, as she kissed me good night, "to get home in the daytime. What did you do with the key of the house, Mason?"

"I left it under the door-mat," I said; "I thought perhaps you might come back while I was away."

Nancy sighed in my arms. "I am so glad I didn't," she said; "this is much nicer just as it is."

When I had Ephraim Bond alone in the room I tried wearily to question him, but he had grown sulky and suspicious. He cursed his son readily enough, and told me that he himself had been brought to the sanatorium by Doctor Mayhew in much the same manner as his son and Mrs. Olsen had taken Nancy. But he would answer no further questions, and finally I decided to let my curiosity wait and see what a night's sleep would do for him. He crept into bed muttering to himself, and in a few moments was apparently sound asleep. I drew a chair to the table under the single gas-light, and wrote a short note to Mr. Ogilby. I was too tired, I knew, to go immediately to bed, and after I had sealed my letter, I leaned back in my chair, going over in my mind the many happenings of the last twenty-four hours; and as I reviewed them my strained nerves relaxed. It was all going to come out happily. What the future held for me I did not know, but now I had Nancy again, and I knew that it could be nothing but good. I had Nancy again, and to-morrow I was going to be really married. With the thought I straightened in my chair; for I suddenly remembered that now I had no marriage license. I had thoughtlessly tucked it into my note-book, and this, with everything else, had been taken from me as I lay unconscious in Central Park. I could get another in Doylestown, I knew; but I feared that by some unknown official vagary the office might be closed, imposing on me an impossible delay. Whether or not I could get one at some point in my journey I did not know, but because it was so important to me, I dreaded lest it should be refused to such a casual party of tourists as we seemed. Then I remembered Mr. Stevens, and turned out my pockets on the table.

I had a few papers of my own, and with the ones which I had taken from Stevens the night before, they made quite a heap upon the table. I sorted through them rapidly, and, to my joy, found not only my note-book, but the license I had taken out at Doylestown still tucked safely inside it. I smoothed it out before me on the table, a commonplace sheet of paper enough, but to me a mysterious and precious passport into paradise, its sober legal phrasing joining Nancy's name with mine in a wonderful and magical unity.

Mr. Stevens' letters, when I came to read them (and I opened them without mental apology), were an amazing collection of miscellaneous rascality. They were signed, for the most part, by names I did not know, and spoke of events in which I had no present interest, but among them I came upon one, stamped and sealed and addressed, not to Stevens, but to Erskine Bond, in care of Doctor Mayhew. The writing itself was non-committal, the facile, flourishing, unlovely copper-plate, which betrays nothing of the writer's character, except, perhaps, that he is able to adopt at will any handwriting he wishes, whether it be some disguise of his own or the characteristic script of another man.

I tore open the envelope with a quickening interest. The letter was of some length, and signed simply "Stevens." I could imagine as I read it how he gnawed his penholder and his already picked and bitten finger-tips; for what he wrote bared almost indecently the mongrel soul of the man. He blustered and threatened, cringed, whined and begged, angry with one sentence, groveling with the very next; in one breath he seemed to pray for assistance and snarl a hint of blackmail.

He spoke of some former letter he had written, and which had remained unanswered, and ran over, as if he were repeating it, the list of his offenses against me in the service of his employer: his ingratiating himself with Ephraim Bond, his officiating at our "wedding," his finding of me in New York, and the attack he and his pals had made upon me in the park; and he added that, since his last letter, he had seen me in the subway, but owing to an accident had been unable to follow me, adding, further, that as I was carrying traveling-bags, there was a possibility that I might be on my way to Winford. But the burden, soul and text of the letter was that he had not been paid. He had not been paid, he had performed many and dangerous services (dangerous, should they be discovered, to both employer and employed), he had performed his half of the bargain faithfully, and now if Erskine Bond thought he could cheat him out of his rights, let him beware. He would have his money if they both had to go to jail for it, and jail it would be if the facts were known. But he proclaimed an infinite preference for jail for them both, to liberty in his present state of being "trimmed."

Why the letter was not mailed I do not know. Perhaps his vacillating courage was not up to it, or he may have written and sent another which pleased him more; but, at least, I now knew why he had come to my hiding-place opposite the sanatorium. This time he hunted, not me, but his employer. It was like him that he should spy upon him first.

With infinite satisfaction I put the letter back into its envelope, and sweeping the whole heap into my traveling-bag, made ready for bed.

It seemed that I had only slept a little while, when there came a thunderous knock on the door. I opened my eyes to find that it was already morning, and that this was the call for which I had arranged at the office. I felt sore and stiff as I got up, but with my bath this feeling disappeared, and I set about my dressing gaily. I had been up some time before I remembered my room-mate. A glance at his bed told me that it was empty. With childish craft he had arranged the pillows under the bedclothes, which, I suppose, had at first subconsciously contented me. Now I hurried through my dressing and went down to the office.

"Has the other gentleman come down yet?" I asked.

"Why, yes," I was assured; "he came down about daylight, I think. He said he had to take the early train for New York and that you knew all about it."

"Very well," I said, hiding my annoyance as well as I was able, for, after all, he was clean gone and there was no use crying over spilt milk. If I needed him again he would not be very hard to find; for, if I needed him, it would mean that he had committed a crime, and the matter would be taken out of my hands.

"Your uncle thought it best to go back to New York," I said to Nancy at breakfast. "He left, in fact, before I was awake."

"I am very glad," Nancy said simply.

"You mean," Mrs. Lathrop asked, "that he ran away?"

"I am afraid he did," I answered; "so that now you will have the tonneau all to yourself."

Mrs. Lathrop sniffed. "I must say," she said, "that for a rascal he was a terribly uninteresting man."

The garage-keeper may have been worthy and upright and a good citizen, but as a mechanic he was a hopeless failure. He returned me the car and a very sizable bill, fairly glowing with what he may have supposed was justifiable pride.

"I found the trouble," he said, "and fixed your pump, too. That didn't seem to be coupled on just right. I worked on the thing myself to almost midnight."

And, indeed, for the first two or three miles I blessed him; for the car ran with all its first serene rapidity. Then there came a new sound, which I recognized with a sinking heart from the pounding of the engine, and which slowly increased, until some time later we were forced to stop. A glance under the hood told me what was the trouble. The over-officious mechanic in tampering with the pump had rendered it practically useless, so that the engine had grown very hot, and the water was boiling in the radiator. There was nothing to do but to wait until it cooled and we were able to run on again — to run on until the new laboring of the engines warned me that it was again time to stop. In this halting way we made our journey. But the night's sleep had refreshed us all, so that we took our misfortunes cheerfully enough.

"It does seem pleasant," Mrs. Lathrop said, "to be riding round like this as if there wasn't a lick of work to do in the whole world. Just the same, I suppose you'd better manage to go through Buckingham and drop me on the way."

Nancy leaned over and whispered to me.

"Mrs. Lathrop," I said, "you are going to have a great honor. You're to be the only guest at our wedding. Nancy thinks that Doylestown is the best place to be married in, so if you will come that far and be matron of honor or something like that, you can start with us on our honeymoon; and we'll drive out to Buckingham after the wedding and leave you there before we go home. Even with the car acting this way we should be in Doylestown by one o'clock."

Mrs. Lathrop flushed quite unexpectedly.

"I should love to do it," she said, "but I'm not hardly what you'd call dressed for a wedding."

Nancy looked down at her own striped gingham dress.

"Do you think this is a pretty wedding-dress?" she asked.

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Lathrop emphatically, "and that settles it. We stop at Buckingham whether that young man wants us to or not. It doesn't make any difference how much of a hurry he is in. I'm not going to see you married in that convict dress. Why," she went on, with rising indignation, "that Mrs. Olsen wore one cut off the same piece of goods. You're a mite taller than I am, but I guess I can fix you."

And so it was arranged. To reach Buckingham needed but a slight detour, and we drew up before Mrs. Lathrop's handkerchief of a lawn a few minutes before noon. I waited in the car while Nancy and Mrs. Lathrop, their arms about each other's waists like two girls, disappeared into the house. After a not insupportable time they came out to the car again, Nancy swathed in a long rain-coat, with the hood drawn up over her head, little satin slippers peeping beneath the hem, and Mrs. Lathrop bonneted and shawled and in the conscious dignity of a silk dress.

The car had cooled during the wait, and we ran to Doylestown without a stop, finding the rector at his very gate. He called his wife as our other witness, and unlocked the door of the dim, lovely little church for us.

In the light of the vestibule Mrs. Lathrop stopped Nancy, and unhooking the rain-coat, carefully turned back the hood and took it from her shoulders, with all the loving solicitude and triumphant pleasure of a true fairy godmother. And it was indeed as if she waved a wand; for Nancy stepped from the dark garment like a new-blown flower, her bride-veil a floating, almost impalpable thing behind her, which scarcely dimmed the luster of her hair, and fell in nebulous softness to the sweeping, embroidered satin train. There were tears in Mrs. Lathrop's eyes as she kissed her.

" My own dress, dearie," she said, " and I never thought to see any one so lovely in it."

There were tears in Nancy's eyes, I think, too, happy tears as she stood shyly proud before me; and half afraid, I stretched out my hand to her, and together we walked up the aisle to where, at the altar, the rector already awaited us.

I made my responses as well as I was able before the soft and glowing wonder of her, and like a swift dream it was over and I found myself once more out again in the bright sunshine with Nancy surely my wife. It was in a sort of golden daze that I drove the car back to Buckingham, where Mrs. Lathrop waved us an *au revoir* from her front gate. I was an irresponsible driver, I am sure, for I must look constantly from the road to Nancy sitting beside me, to assure myself ever and again that this was not some dream.

It was this mental detachment, I suppose, that made me utterly forget our troubles with the car, so that before I had noticed the laboring of the motor it came dully to a stop near the railroad station in Doylestown.

When I got out the water was boiling furiously in the radiator, sending a jet of steam from the vent in the cap.

I stooped and bent my back to the crank, heaving senselessly against the overheated engine. Nancy gave a sharp little scream, and still stooping, I glanced over my shoulder.

Erskine Bond was standing on the sidewalk behind me and as I saw him he shot.

There came a sting of pain in my shoulder, and I remember thinking with satisfaction that the bullet had touched no bone, but in that photographic flash I saw that it had gone through me, cutting obliquely through the soft metal of the radiator. Then a blinding puff of steam rose before my eyes; and over my hands, which still clutched the crank, poured a small cascade of boiling water.

XXXI

HOME

I OPENED my eyes and lay staring up weakly at the white calcimined ceiling, where just above me the run of an irregular crack drew the grotesque profile of an old man, a profile that seemed to my thinking a caricature of Ephraim Bond. The blinds were drawn and the room was in semi-twilight; but a broken shutter slat let in a single bar of the bright sunshine without, throwing a narrow wedge of light across the room, and making a brilliant patch on the old-fashioned, flowered paper of the wall. In a room near by some one was singing, singing softly a merry, contented little song, so softly that I could not hear the words, but only the happiness and lilting cadence of it. I closed my eyes again to listen. I thought it very sweet and wondered languidly who was the singer.

As I wondered my mind harked back, with memory struggling for some solid event to lay hold upon, but for a long time all mental effort was blocked by a solid wall of nightmare. I had dreamed and dreamed badly, that I knew. Titanic, murderous struggles swayed and leaped before me, furious and futile combats, shadowy, unending, useless give and take of blows, chasms of darkness or panels of brilliant light, striped and tortured with bars, reached infinitely before my mental vision, and through it all like a wicked undercurrent ran the rhythmic jogging and the regular iron-shod hoof-beats of a horse, the jolt and jar of a broken-springed carriage with the poignant throb of exquisite pain. But with the memory of that pain came the faint, indescribable scent of lavender, and fainter still, the sweet fragrance of orange blossoms, the touch of a soft arm about me, and beneath my cheek a warm resting place of satin. I drew a long breath and opened my eyes; for memory had returned to me.

"Nancy!" I cried out, and tried weakly to sit up in bed.

The shout which I had intended sounded weak and faint, but she heard it; for the singing abruptly stopped, and I turned my head slowly to find her by the bedside. She put her hand to my face and gently stooped and kissed me, and as she did so, a tear fell on my cheek.

"What is it?" I whispered anxiously; "what is it?"

"Nothing, dear," she said, "only gladness, gladness to find you so."

"I am all right," I answered. "I remember everything perfectly now, Nancy. At least, I think —" and broke off, obsessed by a sudden fear.

"What is it?" said Nancy gently.

"We were married yesterday, weren't we?" I asked. "We really were married, and everything is all right? I know we were. I remember all about it."

Nancy kissed me again.

"Certainly we were," she said; "beautifully married, but I do not think you should talk any more."

"Certainly I can talk," I said. "I remember it all now. He shot me, didn't he? That's why I feel a little weak this morning, but I'm feeling quite strong again now, and I want to talk." And, indeed, with Nancy close beside me, my fallen strength seemed to come surging back over me again like a wave.

"I don't think you should," Nancy said doubtfully. "I think you ought to try to go to sleep."

"Sleep?" I repeated; "why, I've slept all night and had bad dreams. I certainly do not want to sleep any more. I want you to tell me about it. Did he go away?"

She bowed, I suppose, to the inevitable.

"Yes, dear," she said quietly; "he got away. He thought he'd killed you, I think, and was frightened at what he had done; for he turned and ran before anybody else came up."

"Well, how did I get here?" I asked.

"People came," Nancy said, "and I sent some one for a carriage."

"Yes, I remember," I replied; "an awful, jolting carriage, and you held me, Nancy; held me all the way home. Are you not tired to-day?"

Nancy smiled. "It was not yesterday, Mason," she said. "You've been very sick and have had a fever."

"Oh," I replied blankly. Then at last, "How long ago was it? Don't be afraid to tell me. I want to know."

"It was nine days ago, Mason."

I lay and pondered upon this for a while. Once I tried to raise my hand to take Nancy's, but I could not do it, and she stopped me with a gesture.

"No," said Nancy, "you are to keep very quiet. The doctor was insistent on that."

"What does he know about it?" I asked fretfully. "Little country doctors are always fussy."

"But he isn't a little country doctor," said Nancy. "He's one of the greatest surgeons in America. That attack on you got into the papers, Mason, and the next morning some friend of yours, signing himself 'Ogilby,' telegraphed from New York that he was sending a surgeon down, and in the afternoon the surgeon came. I *do* want to tell you something so, only I promised not to until he has seen you again."

"All I want you to tell me is that you love me.

You must keep telling me that, Nancy, if you expect me to get well quickly."

Nancy laughed happily, and told me in a very effective way.

"It seems hardly right," I said, "to be so absolutely happy. Oh, I know it is right, the rightest thing in life, but I can't help being sorry for the rest of the world. I wonder," I asked, stirred by a sudden uneasy thought, "what has happened to all those poor people we left behind us in the sanatorium."

"You got a letter about them," said Nancy. "I saw the postmark, and opened it, because I thought you would want me to. It was from Doctor Mayhew, and he says he has kept his promise to you and broken up the place. It was written on steamer paper, and came back by the pilot boat. Mrs. Lathrop has come over here four or five times to inquire about you, and I read it to her." Nancy laughed. "She hopes that he has eloped with Mrs. Olsen. She said it would serve them both right. And now, Mason, you mustn't talk any more, and I must wet your bandages."

I lay quietly while she flitted in and out of the room, a lovely little vision, seriously bent on her ministrations. She did not touch the bandage at my shoulder, but moistened those about my hands with something delightfully cool and refreshing.

Just as she was finishing her work I heard the drumming of an approaching motor-car, and lay contentedly listening to it, thinking of that last strange ride we had taken together. It did not even stir my surprise that the car apparently came to a stop before our gate; but Nancy left the room, and I heard her going to the front door. Presently there came a subdued sound of men's voices in the hall below. Then steps sounded on the stairs, and a big, fresh-faced, young fellow came into the room, followed by a figure in dust-coat and motor goggles, with his cap still pulled down firmly on his head. Last of all came Nancy.

"Why, Mr. Ogilby!" I said, forgetting in my surprise his wish to remain unknown.

"I felt the need of an outing," said Mr. Ogilby, "and I wanted to see with my own eyes how you were getting on, so I brought the doctor down in my car. I found motoring so pleasant when I made the trip to Winford that as soon as I got back to the city I bought a car of my own."

Nancy changed color a little, and stood with her hands clasped at her breast, a gesture which I already knew meant that she was troubled or puzzled. But the doctor had come to my bedside, and already was taking the wet bandages from my hands.

"Glad to see you so well this morning," he said, briefly. "This is fine, this is fine. Mrs. Ellsworth, I would like to give you some further directions about the case." He rapidly replaced the bandages;

and with a smile over her shoulder at me, Nancy left the room with him.

Mr. Ogilby drew up a chair beside the bed, and divesting himself of duster, cap and glasses, sat down beside me.

"Well," he said, "you did have a beautiful time, and wounded, scalded and all, I envy you. You must tell me all about it some day; for I am closely interested, and, as I told you before, adventures at my time of life must of necessity be for the most part vicarious. It may interest you to know, though, that I have given up my tenement room; even there I found my seclusion almost too monastic. It is right after all that a man should take his place in the world and now, thanks to you, I am able to take it."

"To me?" I asked, in some surprise, with the recurrent doubt if he were, after all, perfectly right in his mind.

"Yes, to you," said Mr. Ogilby. "Well, my dear, I am glad that everything is going so well with you."

This last to Nancy; for she had come back alone into the room, and now stood gazing wide-eyed at the little man who had risen to greet her.

"You — you —" she faltered, "you are —"

"Quite so, my dear," said Mr. Ogilby. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

To my utter surprise Nancy gave a little inarticulate cry, and flew into the arms outstretched to welcome her; where he held her fast, kissing her heartily and giving her little, affectionate pats as she sobbed happily upon his shoulder. Presently Nancy raised her head.

"Does Mason know?" she asked doubtfully, as if she herself was hardly sure. Then quietly, "Oh, we must be careful of him, for he isn't strong yet."

"No; Mason doesn't know," Mr. Ogilby chuckled, turning to me, but still keeping tight hold of Nancy's hand, "but I don't think it will hurt him to know. Your memory is not so good as mine, young man. Do you, by any chance, remember a fine, middle-aged gentleman who sat next you on a bench in Washington Square, a gentleman who, I am ashamed to say, may have been dozing a little?"

"Yes," I said; "I knew I had seen you somewhere before; and you gave me a paper, the paper by which I first found Nancy."

"Quite so," said Mr. Ogilby dryly; "but I did not know about that 'Personal' notice then, even though that Lexington Avenue stable was my own. I had been reading another piece of news which was really very interesting. It was my own obituary. You may possibly have noticed it, 'Jared Bond, dead after five years of mild insanity.' The notice omitted to state that I had a daughter Nancy."

"A daughter!" I gasped.

"Yes, my son," the old gentleman said complacently. "I think you will find me a very companionable father-in-law."

"But how —" Nancy and I commenced in a breath.

"Well," said Mr. Bond, sitting down again and drawing Nancy to his lap, "I have been bursting with it so long that I am going to tell you about it, doctor or no doctor. I am going on the natural assumption that you are pleased; and joy, they say, never hurt anybody." He chuckled again. "The mistake I made was in ever letting Ephraim into the house. Ephraim has always been rather unprincipled, but he was my own brother, and he was poor, while I had plenty of money; so that I thought it only right to do something for him. I am afraid, in those days, that I was a little weak-natured; for gradually Ephraim began to have too much say in the conduct of my affairs, and then came a bad attack of grippe. When that was over I found myself a prisoner in my own room. My brother pretended, even before me, to think me mentally unbalanced; and there I stayed for five years, signing checks, and eating my heart out. I don't want to talk about that part of it; it makes me shudder to think of it. If I made any protest Ephraim kept me quiet with threats of what he would do to Nancy.

"I might have been there yet, for all I know, if it hadn't been for that rascally son of his. Under one of Ephraim's threats I signed a paper which I have since thought was my will, and, for a time, I lived in mortal terror lest my brother should make away with me altogether. Then, by great good fortune, he was called away for a day or so, and his son, who was always hard up, came in to see me.

"Erskine needed a good deal of money, and he needed it right away; so that I was able to make terms with him. He had come prepared, with a fountain-pen and a check-book, but this was my opportunity, and for once I stood fast, deaf to any threat that he might make. I agreed to let him have twice the amount he wanted on one condition, and one condition only. My condition, naturally, was my freedom. He was afraid to do it at first, sorely as he needed the money, but desperation and his natural criminal bent finally suggested a way that was satisfactory and fairly safe for both of us.

"He had at one time half completed a course in some medical college and still retained one or two friends among the more unscrupulous members of his class. Through one of them he obtained a body, and with it a certificate that I had died of an infectious disease; so that I was out of the house, and my funeral over, before his father's return. It was a beautiful plan; for it left me free to go where I liked as long as I kept the secret of my identity, and I think that until my brother went to the bank the other day with his papers as executor, and found that I, in the flesh, had withdrawn all my funds, he never suspected anything. I hadn't been dead much more than a week when I met you in that café, Mason, and took you up to my rooms, where you gave me news of Nancy. You almost killed me with it, but I think I managed to hide it. As it all turned out, my dear," he said to Nancy, "I could not be better pleased, but I shall never get over being ashamed of myself. I ought of course to have got you right away from my brother, but I could think of no harm that could come to you, and I put it off a little. It was a dreadful and cowardly thing to do.

"I don't know whether you can understand it, child, but I hope you can. It is many years since I have been a man of action, and I am afraid my moral courage suffered sadly. Long years of absolute confinement made me timid as well as weak. I was free, free at last in the great, wide world, and I dared not face Ephraim. I planned in a little while to take legal steps, which should secure freedom for us both, but at the very first I didn't dare. I had been told I was insane for so long, that I had come, myself, to mistrust my mental balance. What, I thought, if it were really true, and they were able to lock me up again? It takes some little time for a man to get back his courage. I spent my first week of freedom buying everything I saw in the shops. It was childish of me, but I had so often thought of doing it. Everything you saw in that room, Mason, was brand new. I had a revel of buying."

He gave Nancy a great hug and chuckled.

"But the beautiful part of it was the suggestion of the whole affair. Erskine had seen how easy it was to shut some one up and say that he was insane. I am sorry it suggested his way of kidnapping you, daughter dear; but you have found a greater love and happiness through it and it has all come out all right. You and Mason will be the closer for it all your lives. But the joke of it all, the beautiful joke of it all, is that he tried it successfully on his own father; that he gave him a taste of what I suffered so many years. I could almost forgive him his other misdeeds for that."

"But where are they now, father and son?" I asked.

"Well," said Jared Bond, "I had proof of their rascality, evidence enough to send them both to jail, some of which you gave me, Mason, so that, as soon as I got back to New York, I put detectives on them. In spite of their quarrel their mutual apprehension drew them together. My brother Ephraim, although he waited for my death for the bulk of my money, has, nevertheless, in the last five years amassed quite a tidy fortune; and three days ago he and his precious son set sail for parts unknown where, I think, they will have the sense to remain."

"I wonder if they took the boat with Doctor Mayhew," I said.

"I hope so," said Nancy's father; "my brother would be so pleased to make the unprofessional acquaintance of his jailer."

"I think," said the doctor, appearing in the doorway, "that Mr. Ellsworth has talked quite enough, and that you and I, Mr. Bond, had better be on our way back to the city; particularly as Mrs. Ellsworth has some news for her husband, which I think it only fair she should have the pleasure of telling him in private."

"And it's really so?" said Mr. Bond, getting to his feet.

"Yes," said the doctor, "I think we may safely say it is so."

Mr. Bond turned at the doorway. "I'm selling the old house," he said, "and getting another much more cheerful, and with a pipe organ in it and the best private aviary in America. Nobody's asked me for my blessing yet, but you have it, my children. I am coming back again to-morrow or the next day. When Mason is strong enough I want to have a business talk with him. Good-by, Nancy, my dear. You have the best thing in the world, love and a good husband."

As her father talked, Nancy had sat as I have seen children sit at a festival, supremely happy, but half dazed by the very complexness and multiplicity of their happiness; for this father of hers, now alive and well, even vivaciously humorous, had been for years only a memory to her, a memory and sorrowing anxiety. To have him so suddenly restored, to have the remembered dear one given back, not as she had been taught to think of him, but as she recollected him and had last seen him, seemed a miracle scarcely credible. From time to time her fingers would touch him softly with a little familiar caressing gesture I had come already to recognize, a gesture full of tenderness, as if she reached out to assure herself of the tangible reality of the loved one. Held close to his breast she studied with enraptured eyes the kind, old face so long held reminiscently dear, turning them only at last that they might seek out mine, and share with me this new-found, half-incredible, overwhelming joy. Strangely enough she let him go almost in silence, as if by old custom there was no need of spoken words between them.

When he had gone she stood looking down at me, and together we listened until the drone of the automobile died away in the distance; then, quite simply, Nancy turned, and coming over to the bed, knelt on the floor beside me.

"I think," she said, "no one has ever been as happy as I am. It was happiness enough to have you, Mason, but now I am so glad for you; for I know how foolishly it has troubled you. You know, dear heart, that when he shot you, your hands were frightfully scalded. When the surgeon came he said that there would have to be an operation, that, if you were to get well, little bits of healthy skin must be planted on the burned surface. Mrs. Lathrop and I both offered ours, and I thought it would be so sweet to be able to help you a little that way. But the doctor would have none of it. He said that, as you had a fever, the grafting would be a very difficult process, and that the only sure way of success was to take little pieces from various parts of your own body. And he did it, Mason, oh, the thinnest pieces in the world; so that it did not seem to me as if it could possibly do any good. But it did, Mason; your hands are half well already, and a miracle has happened. The doctor wants to write a paper about it. They may, perhaps, be a little scarred, but your hands, dear love, are going to be as you would want them, as white as other men's."

A little sturdy breeze was rustling the branches outside the window. It rattled at the shutters and then gleefully tore one of them open, letting into the room a flood of the late May morning sunshine, that shone in glory on Nancy's bent head, lighting her tear-bright eyes like summer heavens. In spite of her half-fearful protest, I raised my bandaged hands and drew her close, until her lips touched mine.

THE END

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